

DISPOSAL OF THE DEAD IN THE MAHABHARATA

By

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M.A. PH.D. (ANU, COLORED)

KISHORE VIDYA NIKETAN
VARANASI
1979

with complements for
the author.

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A Study in the Funeral Customs in
Ancient India

BY

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To
the sacred memory of
my grandfather
Pandit Gopinath Tiwari

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The mode of disposal of the dead has its recognized place in the study of the culture of a people. In ancient India also, it was part of a solemn and important rite. In the brahmanical tradition it was counted as a *saṃskāra*, among the traditional sixteen or more *saṃskāras*. It is interesting to note that while many Grhya-sūtras omitted discussion of the funeral rites, independent texts, called Śrāddhakālpas and Pitṛmedha-sūtras, were composed which deal exclusively with them. Whether it was so, as generally imagined, solely because these rites assumed such importance and complexity as to merit separate treatment or because discussion of them had to be separated from the other *saṃskāras* also in view of the grim, inauspicious nature of these rites, is difficult to say.¹ Occurring after the death of a person, the last rites could not be conceived to be of benefit to him in the ordinary sense of the term. Yet, the *antyeṣṭi* or *mṛtyu-saṃskāra* was regarded as of great importance indeed. The *Baudhāyana Pitṛmedha-sūtra* expresses this, admirably in its statement: "By the *saṃskāra* after the birth, (a person) wins this world; by the *saṃskāra* after the death, (he wins) the other

1. Cf. Winternitz, M., *A History of Indian Literature*, Vol. I, Pt. I, p. 239, also p. 245 and fn. 2; Pandey, R. B., *Hindū Saṃskāra—Samājika tathā Dhārmika Adhyāyana*, (in Hindi), pp. 8, 21, 26.

world (or heaven)."¹ It is no wonder, as Hillebrandt has remarked, that the ritualists were eager to have this *samskāra* performed with great care and with regard to all circumstances, and independent treatises, like the one cited above, had to be composed.²

Not unnaturally, the subject of disposal of the dead amongst the ancient Indians has engaged the attention of scholars since long. Ancient Vedic texts and later Dharmaśāstra texts, specially the *Pitṛmedha-sūtras*, etc., were particularly studied in this connection. The results obtained are presented, as the case may be, both in the form of actual practices of the ancient Indians in this regard and as prescriptions of the detailed rules and regulations as provided in the ritual texts.³ Separate notices have been

1. *Baudhāyana Pitṛmedha-sūtra*, III. 1. 4: *jātasamskāreṇa imam lokam abhijayati mṛtasamskāreṇa amum lokam*; see also Pandey, op. cit., p. 296, fn. 1, and Kane, P.V., *History of Dharmaśāstra*, Vol. IV, p. 190.

2. Hillebrandt, A., "Death and Disposal of the Dead : Hindu", in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (henceforth abbreviated as *ERE.*), Vol. 4, p. 476.

3. Good accounts of the funeral customs of the ancient Indians are available in two modern works, frequently used : Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, Vol. IV (already cited), Sec. II, consisting of Chs. VII & VIII (also relevant are the Chs. in Sec. III which deal with *śrāddha*); and Pandey, *Hindu Samskāra*, etc. (also cited above), Ch. X. For a brief but excellent account, see Hillebrandt, op. cit., *ERE.*, 4, pp. 475-6. Among the early writers on the subject, special mention may be made of W. Caland, whose two principal writings, viz., *Altindischer Ahnencult*, etc., and *Die altindischer Todten- und Bestattungsgebräuche*, were frequently drawn upon by later writers. See also Keith, A. B., *The Religion and Philosophy of the Veda and Upanishads*, Pt. II, pp. 417 ff.; Barnett, L. D., *Antiquities of India*, pp. 147-51; and Basham, A. L., *The Wonder that was India*, pp. 176-7, for useful comments.

taken also of the early Buddhist and Jaina materials on the subject,¹ and, in an isolated way, also of materials in many other types of ancient literary sources.² Thus, even though a full historical study is wanting, and, it should also be added, our information is relatively fuller only in respect of the brahmanical tradition, we have, nevertheless, sufficient information to form a general idea of this aspect of the life of the ancient Indian people. It can be said on the basis of these studies that, from very early times and continuing into later history, various modes of disposal of the dead body were practised in ancient India, such as burial of one type or another—in earth or water, exposure on open or high ground, on trees, etc., to birds and beasts, and, of course, cremation.³ Cremation seems to have become very

1 For the early Buddhist evidence, see esp. Rhys Davids, T. W., *Buddhist India*, pp. 36-7; and, for the Jaina evidence, Jain, J. C., *Jaina Agama Sahitya men Bhartiya Samaja* (in Hindi), pp. 369 ff. Also Poussin, Louis de la Vallée, "Death and Disposal of the Dead : Buddhist", *ERE.* 4, p. 446; and Jacobi, H., "Death and Disposal of the Dead : Jaina", *Ibid.*, p. 484.

2. Brief remarks on the disposal of the dead are available in all kinds of general and cultural studies on individual literary works of various types and of both indigenous and foreign origin. Some of these are used as corroborative evidence later on in this study.

3. See generally the works cited in fn. 3, p. 2 above. That different modes were practised from the earliest times is emphasized by all the writers. In brief, it may be noted that while cremation had become the more popular practice already in the early Vedic period, it seems quite clear that burial also was regarded legitimate. For the evidence of earth-burial, see esp. *Rg-veda*, X. 18. 10-13; VII. 89.1; also *Atharva-veda*, 5. 30. 14; 18. 2. 34; cf. also *RV.*, X. 15. 14 and 95. 14. A few of these evidence will be noticed at some length again in this study.

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early the more popular practice, but, as we know from later brahmanical texts, it was specifically forbidden in certain cases, as for example in the cases of children of a certain age, aborted or still-born foetus, ascetics, etc.¹ The available evidence does seem to suggest that the modes varied sometimes on account of essential cultural differences,² but there is sufficient evidence also to indicate that within the same culture all kinds of different modes were practised—exposure or burial of various types in some cases and cremation in others. It may be argued that the standard modes within a culture

1. For denial of cremation in special cases, as prescribed in the brahmanical texts, see esp. Pandey, op. cit., pp. 337 ff., and Kane, op. cit., pp. 227 ff. Some instances from the *Mahābhārata* will be examined below.

2. See, e. g., Kane, op. cit., pp. 246 ff., where evidence from the *Śatapatha Brahmana* on the various types of *śmaśānas* or sepulchral mounds is cited and in which the worshippers of *devas*, followers of *asuras*, 'easterners', etc. are distinguished from each other. An *asura* type of burial seems to be referred to in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, VIII. 8.5 (cited in Kane, op. cit., p. 232). Notice also the instance of the burial of Virādha in the *Rāmāyaṇa*; *Rāmāyaṇa* (Baroda Cr. edn.), Aranya-kāṇḍa, Sarga 4; see esp. verse 24, which reads as : *Rakṣasām gatasattvanām eṣa dharmāḥ sanātanaḥ, Avate ye nidhīyante teṣām lokāḥ sanātanaḥ*. Kane also cites (op. cit., p. 234) a statement from the mediaeval digest *Hāratala* (c. 12th cent. A. D.) to the effect that the Magas buried their dead underground and the Daradas and Luptrakas placed their dead on trees. At least, two of these, the Magas and the Daradas, are generally located in the North-western part of the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent; see Rapson (ed.), *The Cambridge History of India*, Vol. I., pp. 362-3; Sircar, D. C., *Studies in the Geography of Ancient and Mediaeval India*, pp. 25, 61, 164; also Shaffer, Robert, *Ethnography of Ancient India*, pp. 29, 43, 135.

could be identified and any variations would be only exceptional. But, as in the case of the brahmanical tradition, the number of such exceptions could be very large indeed. In such a situation, therefore, unless there were firm evidence, it would be hazardous to speak of essential cultural differences on the basis of variations in the mode of disposal of the dead body.²

The material on disposal of the dead in the *Mahābhārata*³ also has been studied by several

1. This becomes obvious even if the disposal of the dead in the brahmanical tradition alone is considered and the many distinctions and exceptions are taken note of. Kane speaks of the bewildering variety in the various rituals of *antyeṣṭi* and cites *Nirṇayasindhu* (a mediaeval digest of 17th cent. A. D.) to show that the last rites differed in each *śākhā*, though certain things were common to all; see Kane, op. cit., Vol. IV, p. 190. On this variety, Hillebrandt notes (op. cit., *ERE.*, 4, p. 476) : "Caland divided the whole ceremonial into 114 acts, not to speak of variations in these."
2. Cf. Keith, op. cit., p. 417 : "There is nothing in Vedic literature to encourage the view, which has been so energetically contended for in connection with western civilization, that the custom of burning the dead is one which denotes an essential distinction of race, as contrasted with the practice of burying the dead. The burning of the dead is set over against the burying of the dead in the Rīgveda merely as two legitimate alternative methods, and this is the state of affairs throughout the history of India,....." See also Ucko, Peter J., "Ethnography and Archaeological Interpretation of Funerary Remains", in *World Archaeology*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Oct. 1969, pp. 262ff., esp. 273-6. Ucko makes the point ably and forcefully that while there is evidence that, at a given time, specific funerary practices characterise particular societies in some way, much variability has also been seen to exist in this respect sometimes within the same culture, and that, it would be unsafe to identify groups of people or cultures on the basis of funerary practices.
3. Except where specified, the citations from the

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scholars. We should like to note, particularly three names : Hopkins, who made short but very significant comments about "Royal Burial" in his study of the social position of the ruling caste in ancient India on the basis of the epic materials; Vaidya, who, in a study of the epic and its society in his *Mahābhārata-mīmāṃsā*, makes similarly brief but very pertinent comments on the disposal of the dead and last rites, and Bhattacharya, who devotes a short chapter on cremation, etc., in his work on the society in the age of the *Mahābhārata*.¹ While these studies are not without values of their own, they are brief and general, and invariably as small parts of larger studies of the epic culture. For the same reason, they tend to highlight the standard modes and do not generally linger over the variations and unusual features.²

Before we present our own study of the *Mahābhārata* material, a few preliminary remarks may be made, which pertain to the nature of our source and to the methodology adopted by us. In view of the problem *per se* of fitting the epic material into neat space-time framework, we make no pretensions to

Mahābhārata are all from the Poona Critical edition. Also, the name of the epic is abbreviated in the notes as *Mbh.*

1. See Hopkins, Edward W., *The Social and Military Position of the Ruling Caste in Ancient India*, etc., pp. 114-8; Vaidya, C. V., *Mahābhārata-mīmāṃsā* (Hindi), pp. 286-7, 472-4; and Bhattacharya, Sukhamaya, *Mahābhārata-kālina Samāja* (in Hindi), pp. 338-41 (the following Sec. in this work is devoted to *śrāddha* and *tarpaṇa*).
2. On some other limitations of these studies, see the immediately following foot-note.

derive precise historical inferences. The conclusions presented here may be regarded as generally applicable for the period 4th century B. C. to 4th century A. D., which is assigned usually to the growth of the epic in its present form, with the clear margin that they may sometimes even refer to older times, since the epic is supposed to deal with much older history and actually contains legends traceable in earlier literature.¹ Similarly, these conclusions

1. On the age of the *Mahābhārata*, see Winternitz, *A History of Indian Literature*, Vol. I, Pt. II, pp. 399ff., esp. 416-7; Hopkins, in Rapson (ed.), *The Cambridge History of India*, Vol. I, pp. 230-1; and Mehendale, in Majumdar, etc. (ed.), *The Age of Imperial Unity*, p. 251. Cf. also Sukthankar, V. S., "Prolegomena" to the Cr. edn. of the *Adi-parvan*, in Sukthankar, *Critical Studies in the Mahābhārata* (being Vol. I of *V. S. Sukthankar Memorial Edition*), p. 129 : "...The constituted text cannot be accurately dated, nor labelled as pertaining to a particular place or personality. It is a mosaic of old and new matter., in an average *adhyāya* ... we may read a stanza of the second century B. C. followed by one written in the second century A. D. Sometimes the gap will occur in the middle of a line, ..." However, these limitations did not deter Hopkins from trying to derive a picture representative of the epic as a whole (see Hopkins, in Rapson (ed.), *The Cambridge Hist. of India*, Vol. I, Ch. XI, esp. p. 230; also his *Social and Military Position of the Ruling Caste*, etc.). Sukthankar also imagined a certain unity of the *Mahābhārata* in its *dharma* and *nīti* materials; see Sukthankar, "The Bhṛguś and the Bhārata : A Text-Historical Study", in Sukthankar, *Critical Studies in the Mahābhārata*, pp. 334-6. The general approach of Vaidya and Bhattacharya is the same, but their treatment, particularly of the latter, suffers from defective chronological perspective; see esp. Vaidya, op. cit., p. 169, and Bhattacharya, op. cit., Preface, pp. 8-9. Pusalkar is relatively more judicious in his short paper, "Social World in the *Mahābhārata*", *Jour. of the Ganganatha Jha Res. Inst.*, Vol. XXVI, 1970, pp. 575-80.

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may be treated as valid for North India generally, except when the context suggests more precise localities. Further, from the sociological point of view, from what we know of the general nature and possible authorship of the epic in its present form, the picture presented by it should be considered as representative generally of the Brahmanical tradition alone, except where the usages are clearly distinguished as unbrahmanical and alien or are palpably so.¹ These are all serious limitations, but they do not, in our opinion, take away from the value of the study. Our most important gain is that in the various essential or incidental narratives and casual allusions of the epic, we find excellent corroboration for information available elsewhere, especially in the ritual texts, which are, after all, only prescriptive and normative. In one instance, at least, the *Mahābhārata* informs about an aspect of cremation for which the ritual texts seem to have no parallel.²

The scope of the present investigation and the method followed by us also need a word of explanation. We have culled out from the *Mahābhārata* materials relating both to the standard mode of

1. The brahmanical nature of the epic is accepted by all authors; however, on this see esp. Sukthankar, "The Bhārgava and the Bhārata, etc." (cited in fn. 1, p. 17 above); Shende, N. J., "The Authorship of the *Mahābhārata*", *Annals of the Bhandarkar Or. Res. Inst.*, Vol. XXIV, 1943, pp. 67ff.; and Pathak, V. S., *Ancient Historians of India*, pp. 9ff.
2. We refer here to the exigencies of war, in which the dead were abandoned or some kind of collective cremation accorded them; see below.

disposal of the dead body and to others which are different from it, and have paid particular attention to the latter. In this, our general approach has been to look for sanctions in ritual prescriptions and produce parallels from various sources. Also, since our need was to find confirmation principally for the exceptional and unusual methods, we have purposely kept a wide space-time horizon before us. In producing the parallels, we have generally confined ourselves to literary sources and have occasionally drawn upon modern ethnological observations, since these were the places where we found satisfactory explanations. If no evidence from archaeology is produced, the main reason was that with the kind of evidence available in the *Mahābhārata*, no fruitful correlation with archaeological material was possible. Archaeology, when it enlightens about funerary customs, is able to produce, almost as a rule, evidence of various types of earth-burial only—such as whole or fractional skeletal remains, whether buried immediately after death or after cremation or exposure, the position of the body and the orientation inside the grave, various kinds of grave goods, and, of course, the grave itself. But no such evidence of burial is available in the *Mahābhārata*. We did not come across any reference in the epic even to the rites of *asthi-saṅcayana* (collection of charred bones) and *śmaśāna* (building of some funeral memorial mound), as prescribed in the brahmanical ritual texts.¹

1. On the rite of *asthi-saṅcayana* and *śmaśāna*, see below. Incidentally, for a picture of burial customs based

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entirely on archaeological sources, see generally Singh, P., *Burial Practices in Ancient India*, etc. and Gupta, S. P., *Disposal of the Dead and Physical Types in Ancient India*; see also Das, D. R., "Archaeological Evidence on Cremation and Post-cremation Burial in India", *Journal of Ancient Indian History*, Vol. III, Pts. 1-2, 1969-70, pp. 50-71. The Kumhara Tekri site near Ujjain, which was excavated in 1938-39 by S.K. Dikshit under the direction of M. B. Garde, is supposed to have been an early historic cremation as well as burial ground, dating from before the 2nd cent. B.C., because it revealed a considerably large number of charred human bones, besides some large earthen pots containing bones, charred organic materials, ashes, pots, etc., and several dozen more or less preserved human skeletons in systematic extended burials. But the site has not been fully excavated and there are many loose ends in its story. See Dikshit, S. K., *Ujjayini : Itihasa tathā Purātattva* (in Hindi), pp. 75-81, where the *Annual Administrative Report of Archaeological Department, Gwalior State* (sāṁvat 1995, pp. 14 ff.) is also cited, in which a report of this excavation was published.

CHAPTER II.

GENERAL FEATURES OF CREMATION

The general picture obtained from the *Mahābhārata* about disposal of the dead may be summarised as follows :¹ Cremation was the standard practice of disposal of the dead body. Among the important and relatively more detailed descriptions of it are the cremation of Pāṇḍu in the Ādi-parvan;² of the many slain heroes of the great battle in the Strī-parvan,³ of Bhīṣma in the Anuśāsana-parvan,⁴ of Vasudeva in the Mausala-parvan,⁵ etc. For cremation in such places is used the simple straightforward word *dāha*, or such technical words as *preta-kārya*, *aurdhvadehika-kārya*, *parama-kārya*, *samskāra*, etc.. The different elements of the

1. Cf. Hopkins, *Social and Military Position of the Ruling Caste*, etc., pp. 114 ff.; and Bhattacharya, *op. cit.*, pp. 338 ff.
2. *Mbh.*, 1. Chs. 116-118. Certain exceptional features of Pāṇḍu's cremation are being separately discussed below in the last Chapter.
3. *Mbh.*, 1. Ch. 26 (Both this chapter and the Ch. 27, which describes the *udaka-kriyā* for the cremated heroes, are labelled in the colophons as 'śrāddha-parva'; see also Corrigenda on p. VII of the Cr. edn.). The description of the cremation here too presents some unusual features, which will be discussed below.
4. *Mbh.*, 13.154.8-17.
5. *Ibid.*, 16.8.15-27.

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rite of cremation¹ included the preliminary preparation of the dead body by formally dressing and anointing it, draping and decorating it with silk cloth, flowers and garlands, carrying it on the shoulders of men in some kind of palanquin or in a carriage (*śibikā, yāna*) in an impressive procession, joined by the bereaved relatives, including women and by the host of subjects, to the appointed place in a grove or forest by the river bank. Here the funeral pyre was elaborately prepared with all kinds of wood, including much scented wood, and the body was placed on it and burnt with the pouring of clarified butter, etc. It seems that the fire to light the pyre was carried in the procession from the home of the deceased and it was supposed to be the same he had himself ritually established while living.² There was much lamentation and wailing, and, while the cremation went on, the atmosphere resounded with the chanting of the Vedic *mantras*. The purificatory bath (*snāna*) and water-offering

1. The description of Pāṇḍu's cremation in the Ādi-parvan, Ch. 118, which is quite detailed, may be considered typical. The description of Vasudeva's cremation, *Mbh.*, 16.8.15-27, may also be seen in this connection.
2. With reference to Pāṇḍu's case, see *Mbh.* 1.118.6, 13; *ibid.*, 16.8.21 expresses similar ideas about Vasudeva's funeral. In *Mbh.*, 15. Chs. 45-47, there is expression of much anxiety that Dhṛtarāṣṭra, etc., might have died in an inappropriate or ordinary forest fire (*vr̥thā agni*), and, similarly, expression of relief when it was learnt that the forest fire had actually originated from the one which the blind king had himself established for his vedic rites. For the ritual prescriptions, see Kane, *op. cit.*, pp. 202, 206, 210; Pandey, *op. cit.*, p. 321.

(*udaka-kriyā*, *salila-kriyā*) followed immediately after the cremation. There was a customary period of mourning and impurity (*aśauca*), noted in one case to be twelve days, which, it appears, had to be spent camping outside the usual residence, and the mourners had to sleep on the ground.¹ The *śrāddha* or obsequial offerings followed this, and there are several elaborate descriptions of it in the epic.² The *śrāddha* is the funeral feast and the essential element of it as described in the epic is the distribution of gifts of food, dress and various precious articles to the *brāhmanas*.³

It has already been remarked that the *Mahābhārata* seems to contain no clear reference to the rite of *asthi-saṅcayana*, which formed an essential element of *antyeṣṭi* as described in several ritual texts. This rite involved the collection of charred bones and ashes some days after the cremation and disposal of them in various ways—hanging in a bundle on the branch of a tree, or recremating in some special

1. *Mbh.*, 1.118.29-30, to be read along with 119.1-3; also *ibid.*, 15.47.13, 16. In *Mbh.*, 12.1.1-2, it is said that after they had made the water-offerings for their dead relatives, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Vidura, Paṇḍavas and the ladies of the Bharata family stayed for one month at the same place outside the capital undergoing purification. Some evidence of instant purification from such pollution is discussed below.

2. See, e.g., *Mbh.*, 1.119.1-2; 12. Ch. 42; etc.. In the *Anuśāsana-parvan*, there is a long tract, from the Ch. 87 to 92, which deals with the varieties and merits of *śrāddha*.

3. For a similar description of cremation, etc., in the *Ramayana*, see Hopkins, *Social and Military Position of the Ruling Caste*, etc., p. 117.

cases, or depositing at the foot of a tree, or, more generally, burying them in a hole dug in the ground and sometimes also building some kind of a memorial mound (*śmaśāna*) over them.¹ Apparently, this practice gradually went out of vogue, and, already towards the close of the epic, the custom of depositing the bones in holy river had probably become more common. It is thus that a chapter in the praise of the river Ganges in the *Anuśāsana-parvan* contains the statements that persons whose bones are laid in that holy river never fall from the heaven, and that so long as the bones of a person remained in the waters of the Ganges, that many thousands of years did he enjoy stay in the heaven.² An actual instance of this practice also seems to be preserved in the *Āśramavāsika-parvan* in the description of the collection and disposal of the remains of *Dhṛtarāṣṭra*, *Gāndhārī* and *Kuntī*.³

1. For the rite of *asthi-saṅcayana* and *śmaśāna*, see Pandey, *Hindū Saṃskara*, pp. 327-9; Kane, *History of Dharma-śāstra*, Vol. IV, pp. 240 ff., 246 ff.

2. See *Mbh.*, 13.27.27, 31:

*Spṛṣṭāni yeṣāṃ gāṅgeyaḥ toyair gātrāṇi dehinām,
Nyastāni na punas teṣāṃ tyāgaḥ svargād vidhīyate.* 27

Yavad asthi manuṣyasya gāṅgātoyeṣu tiṣṭhati,

Tavad varṣasahasrāṇi svargaṃ prāpya mahīyate. 31

Nilakaṇṭha explains *nyastāni* in the verse 27 (= 13.26.28 in his version) as *gātrāṇi asthīṃ nyastāni gāṅgāyam*, and is followed by modern translators like P. C. Roy, etc.. On the gradual change in the rite of *asthi-saṅcayana*, see Pandey, op. cit., p. 329; Kane, op. cit., pp. 243 ff..

3. See *Mbh.*, 15.47.14-15, 22-23. The latter two verses read as:

Although not specifically mentioned, it seems to be presumed in all the above descriptions that the cremations took place only in certain fixed and known places, generally on the banks of rivers, which were customarily used for the purpose. But the description of Vasudeva's funeral presents an interesting exception. It is clearly mentioned there that his funeral pyre was set up in the place which was dearest to him during life.¹

There is no indication of any distinctions generally in the cremations accorded to members of the different classes of the society. The description of the cremation of the brāhmaṇa warrior Droṇa² is similar to those given above, which relate all to princes or members of the kṣatriya class. The only difference in Droṇa's case appears to be that his funeral pyre was set up by *jaṭila brahmacārins*.³ If

*Te capi rājavacanāt puruṣā ye gatābhavan,
Sainkalpya teṣāṃ kulyāni punaḥ pratyagamaḥ tataḥ.* 22
*Malyair gandhaiś ca vividhaiḥ pūjayitva yath vidhi,
Kulyāni teṣāṃ saṃyojya tadācakyur makīpateḥ.* 23

Nilakaṇṭha understands *sainkalpya* as *ekikṛtya*, *kulyāni* as *asthāni*, *pratyagaman* as *gaṅgāṃ iti śeṣaḥ*, and *saṃyojya* as *gaṅgayeti śeṣaḥ*. S. K. Belvalkar, the editor of the Āśramavāsika-parvan, Cr. edn., notes that the word *kulya*, in the context, denotes a receptacle for bones; see the Critical apparatus on *Mbh.*, 15.47.22; also Agrawala, V. S. *Bhārata Savitri—Mahābhārata ka Eka Navīna evaṃ Saragarbhita Adhyayana*, Vol. 3, p. 220.

1. *Mbh.*, 16.8.23 :

*Yastu deśaḥ priyas tasya jivato'bhūn mahātmanah,
Tatraīnam upasainkalpya pīṣmedhaṃ pracakrire.*

2. *Mbh.*, 11.23.37 ff.

3. *Ibid.*, 11.23.39. A *brahmacārin* was not permitted to be a carrier of the dead body of a person or a relative even of his own caste, except his parents, guru, ācārya and upādhyāya, and he was considered not guilty of breaking

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we are told also that bows, arrows, various missiles and parts of chariots, besides other things, were used for the purpose, it is said similarly also about the other slain heroes of the *Mahābhārata*.¹

The above is the general picture of cremation obtained from the epic descriptions. Since the characters involved are princes and important personages, there are undoubtedly exaggerations in the detailed descriptions of the preparations, processions, gifts and such other elements of this last rite. But probably this is what happened on a modest scale even in cases of ordinary persons. At least, this may be presumed to be the case as far as the members of the higher classes of the brahmanical society—the brāhmaṇas and the kṣatriyas—are concerned, especially since this picture fits generally with the one obtained from the ritual texts. The *Mahābhārata* gives unambiguous expression to the sentiment that no dead should ever be without the customary funeral rites.²

his vows of studenthood if he carried the bodies of any one of the five mentioned above, see Kane, op. cit., p. 214, where various authorities are cited.

1. *Mbh.*, 11.23. 39-40; cf. *ibid.* 11.26.29.

2. See *Mbh.*, 11.26.21-26.

CHAPTER III

TREE-BURIAL

In our discussion of the usual mode of cremation in the previous chapter, we have been purposely brief and confined ourselves to outlining the main features, because this has been discussed at some length also by earlier scholars. We intend to draw special attention to instances in the epic where unusual or exceptional ways of disposal of the dead body seem to be referred to, directly or otherwise.¹ The full significance of these instances, even when noticed, was generally missed. Sometimes, as it will be demonstrated below, they were even misunderstood. Such an instance, we may add, has provided us also with an occasion for some useful textual criticism.

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1. By unusual and exceptional, we mean both the modes of disposal which are provided for in the dharmasāstric texts as exceptions to the usual cremation, and also the various types of burials or unusual forms of disposal which are not referred to in the ritual texts, even as exceptions, but which are known from other sources. For some instances of the latter, such as casting off of the dead body, doubts may perhaps be expressed whether, in the absence of adequate evidence of ritualization, these may be designated as 'disposals' in the proper sense of the term. We have, however, preferred to treat them as such on considerations like : (i) frequency of reference to them in a variety of sources, (ii) nature of reference to them, suggesting customary behaviour, (iii) indication of such practices in other cultures in the ancient world, and (iv) corroboration of some sort by modern anthropological observation, with reference to tribal cultures both in India and outside.

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We may begin our discussion with an episode from the Virāṭa-parvan. The context is of the Pāṇḍavas about to enter Virāṭa-nagara at the start of their one year exile incognito (*ajñātavāsa*), and of their hiding their weapons to complete their disguise.¹ This they do by making a bundle of their bows and arrows, etc., and depositing them in the hollow of a big *śamī* tree near the cremation ground on the outskirts of the city.² To ensure that their weapons are not stolen in their absence, they tie a dead body to the tree to scare away any intruder by its foul smell and perhaps also by generating fear.³ Further, to keep away the over-inquisitive, they spread a rumour around, especially among the cowherds in the vicinity, that, following their family tradition and in accordance with the practice of their ancestors, they had tied up on that tree the body of their old mother who had recently died at the age of one hundred and eighty years.⁴ Incidentally, the reference to the dead body on the *śamī* tree, recurs when, at the conclusion of the exile, Arjuna has to bring prince Uttara to the tree to retrieve his wea-

1. *Mbh.*, 4. Ch. 5.

2. *Ibid.*, 4.5.12-14, 25-6.

3. *Ibid.*, 4.5.27:

*Śarīraṃ ca mṛtasyaikam samabadhnanta pāṇḍavaḥ,
Vivarjayiṣyanti nara dūrād eva śamīm imām,
Abaddham savam atreti gandhamāghraya pūṭikam.*

4. *Ibid.*, 4.5.28-29:

*Aśītisatavarjeyam mātṛ na iti vādiyaḥ,
Kūṭadharma'yam asmākaṃ pūrvair ācārto'pi ca,
Samāsajano vṛkṣe'smīn iti vai vyāharanti te. 28
Āgopal vipulebhya dācaksāṇaḥ paramtapāḥ
Ajāgmur nagara bhyaśān pārthaḥ śatrunibarhaṇāḥ. 29*

pons to fight the attacking Kaurava army.¹ The depositing of the weapons in the *śamī* tree near the cremation ground, but without any reference to the dead body, occurs also in the Parvasaṅgraha chapter of the Ādi-parvan.²

It appears that we have here a suggestion of tree-burial, and the reference to *kula-dharma* and *pūrvācāra* seems to support the inference. The statement that the Pāṇḍavas started a rumour to explain the dead body tied to the tree may indicate that this sight was unusual and tree-burial was not generally practised in the locality. At the same time, it seems also clear that the credibility of the rumour does not simply depend on the authority of the label "*kula-dharma*" deliberately attached to it, but also on the distinct probability of that specific *kula-dharma*. In other words, even if tree-burial was not generally practised in that locality, it must have been known

1. Ibid., 4. Chs. 33 ff.; see esp. 4.37.1; 38.1-2, 9ff.. Prince Uttara is portrayed here as reluctant to go up the tree for the weapons for fear of pollution through touching of a dead body, which, he said he had heard, was tied up there. Arjuna says in reply (4.38.12) that the bows alone were there and no dead body. This sounds incongruous with what has been said earlier in the Ch. 5 of this parvan. Two things, however, need to be noted. The reference to the tying of the dead body on the *śamī* in the Ch. 5 is quite unambiguous and forms logical part of the narrative. And, in the latter episode, prince Uttara says clearly (4.38.9) that he had heard of a dead body tied up on the tree. Arjuna's denial, therefore, may either be understood as a bit of diplomatic persuasion being tried on Uttara, or in the form that the dead body had decomposed and disappeared during the course of one year.

2. *Mbh.*, 1.2.130.

there that there were some people who actually practised it. Hopkins noticed this episode and observed: "I find not the slightest trace of such a mode of burial elsewhere, though it was an extraordinary statement to invent, if the custom appeared as peculiar to the writers as to the historian...." He also pointed to the resemblance with the Persian exposure to birds, but even though he suspected the books in which this episode appeared to be late additions to the epic, he wondered, if they could be so late as to be infected by Persian custom.¹ The critical edition of the *Mahābhārata* has demonstrated that this episode is not a late interpolation. The comparison with the Persian custom may also be inapt because while the suggestion here is of tree-burial, the Persian exposure cannot quite be described in that form.²

About the absence of any trace of tree-burial elsewhere, Hopkins would probably be very right if his remarks were to be understood, only with reference to the epic. As it is, this mode of disposal of the dead is known elsewhere. Instances of it have been noted about several primitive peoples in the world.³ In India, suggestions of this have been

1. Hopkins, *Social and Military Position of the Ruling Caste*, etc., p. 115 and foot-note.
2. For the Persian custom of exposure of the dead, see Söderblom, Nathan, "Death and Disposal of the Dead: Parsi", *ERE.*, 4, pp. 502-5; also Masani, Sir Rustom, *The Religion of the Good Life: Zoroastrianism*, pp. 146 ff.
3. See Hartland, E. S., "Death and Disposal of the Dead: Introduction and Primitive", *ERE.*, 4, p. 421; Werblowsky, R. J. Zwi, "Funerary Rites and Cus-

sometimes seen in the *Atharva-veda*. The relevant verse, *AV.*, 18.2.34, is translated by Whitney as: "They that are buried (*nikhātāḥ*), they that are scattered away (*paroptāḥ*), they that are burned (*dagdhāḥ*) and they that are set up (*uddhitāḥ*)—all those Fathers, O Agni, bring thou to eat the oblation."¹ The commentary explains the word *uddhita* metaphorically, as "those Fathers who are stationed in *ūrdhvadeśa* and *pitr-loka*".² Whitney preferred to understand it as referring to exposure on something elevated, and several scholars have imagined it as suggesting depositing of the dead body on trees.³ A reference to tree-burial has been seen also in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*. It occurs as an expiation in the ceremony of "the offering of the barren cow", in which when the cow is slaughtered and found to be in calf, there is need for disposal of the embryo. The relevant statement runs as: "Here now they say, 'what is he to do with that embryo?

toms", in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. 9, p. 1013. Interesting comments on the symbolism of tree-burial will be found in Neumann, Erich, *The Great Mother — An Analysis of the Archetype*, Ch. 13: "The Lady of the Plants"; see esp. pp. 50, 243-4; also plate 105 which reproduces an East African ethnological drawing showing graphically a tree-burial.

1. *AV.*, 18.2.34:

*Ye nikhātā ye paroptā ye dagdhā ye coddhitāḥ,
Sap̄ms t̄n agnī ā vaha p̄t̄n haviṣe attave.*

See also the tr. of this verse by Whitney.

2. See notes in Whitney's tr. of the verse.

3. Besides the notes in Whitney's tr., already cited, see

Keith, *Religion and Philosophy of the Veda*, etc., Pt. II, p. 417; Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, Vol. IV, p. 232; Pandey, *Hindū Saṁskṛta*, p. 338. Kane thought that it might alternatively refer to cave-burial.

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They may expose it on a tree; for the embryos have the air for their support, and the tree is, as it were, the same as the air : thus he establishes it on its own support. But, say they, if, in that case, any one were to curse him, saying 'They shall expose him dead on a tree', then verily it would be so."¹ The suggestion of tree-burial in the above statement appears unmistakable,² but the entire context, especially the reference to the curse, shows that this mode was disapproved. All this goes to show that the practice of burying dead bodies in trees was known in India from very ancient times, and it continued to be practised in later history amongst some unbrahmanical tribes. It may be added that examples of tree-burial have been noticed in several modern Indian tribes, as Andamanese, Nagas, Maria Gonds and Khasis.³

The ancient Virāṭa or Matsya country is generally located in the north-eastern part of the present Rajasthan—in the Alwar-Bharatpur-Jaipur region,⁴ but that information may not be much useful since our analysis of the Virāṭa-parvan episode suggests that the practice of tree-burial should be considered rather a rarity in the locality. Two other comments, however, need to be made to complete the discussion. Firstly, the mention of a *śamī* tree near the *śmakāna*,

1. *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, IV. 5.2.13: also tr. by Eggeling, in *SBE.*, XXVI, pp. 395-96.

2. Cf. Keith, op. cit., Pt. II, p. 417 and fn. 7; Pandey, op. cit., p. 338.

3. See Crooke, W., "Death and Disposal of the Dead: Indian, Non-Aryan", *ERE.*, 4, p. 482.

4. See Sircar, D. C., *Studies in the Geography of Ancient and Mediaeval India*, pp. 93, 105.

which served as the receptacle of the dead body, is not without significance, since the developed ritual of cremation in the brahmanical tradition makes specific uses of the branch of a *śamī* tree.¹ Secondly, the fact that the Pāṇḍavas could easily collect a dead body in the neighbourhood would suggest that casting away or depositing of the dead body on open ground or exposing it to birds and beasts (not to speak of earth or water-burial) at or near the *śmaśāna* was actually practised by some people.

1. See Kane, op. cit., pp. 205, 212. See also Pandey, op. cit., p. 328, where, in the description of the rite of *asthi-saṅcayana*, reference is made to the requirement of hanging the receptacle containing the bones or the bundle of them on the branch of a *śamī* tree; cf. Kane, op. cit., p. 242.

CHAPTER IV

CASTING AWAY OF THE DEAD BODY,
EXPOSURE OR CAVE-BURIAL

The comment at the end of the previous chapter serves as an appropriate introduction to discuss some other instances in the epic which refer to or suggest casting off of dead bodies, exposing them in high places or burying in caves. In the Udyoga-parvan, dilating upon the follies of acquisitiveness and virtues of non-attachment, Vīdura makes the statement to Yūdhiṣṭhira that people die and others enjoy the wealth accumulated by them. They are themselves either consumed by fire or birds feed upon their dead bodies.¹ The stark reality of death is spoken of in the preceding and the following verses also and the references in them are clearly to cremation, but here, in this statement, the wording seems to make a clear distinction between two different modes of disposal: casting away of dead bodies and consigning them to fire. In the Anuśāsana-parvan, to Yūdhiṣṭhira's query as to what happened to people who vowed to make gifts to brāhmaṇas but did not do so out of greed, Bhīṣma replies by citing an old story (*purāṭānam itihāsam*), of a jackal and a monkey.² According

1. *Mbh.*, 5. 40. 15a:

Anyo dhanam pretagatasya bhūṅkte vayāmsi cāgniscu śarīra-dhātūn.

2. *Mbh.*, 13. Ch. 9.

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to this story, two acquaintances of a previous life were reborn as these animals for not giving to a brāhmaṇa certain promised things or for stealing fruits from a tree owned by a brāhmaṇa. The fate of the person born as jackal and the conversation of the two friends in their animal births is described in the following words: "thereafter one day, the monkey, seeing the jackal feeding on a dead body and remembering the previous birth, asked him—Brother, what was the heinous sin committed by you in the previous life that you are feeding on the hateful, foul-smelling corpse in the cemetery?"¹ The answer is too stereotyped to be repeated. The conversation, however, is interesting inasmuch as it suggests a certain mode of disposal of the dead, viz., casting off of dead bodies.² Still another evidence, which comes from

1. Ibid., 13.9.9-10 :

*Tataḥ parāsūn khādantāṁ sṛgālaṁ vānaro' brūvīt,
Śmaśānamadhye saṁprekṣya pūrvajātīm anusmaran. 9*

*Kim tvayā pāpakāṁ karmā kṛtāṁ pūrvāṁ sudāruṇāṁ,
Tas tvāṁ śmaśāne mṛtakāṁ pūtikāṁ atsi kutsitān. 10*

2. The expression, "who accompanies the man when his dead body is left or cast away like a piece of wood or a lump of clay", that occurs more than once in a dialogue between Yudhiṣṭhira and Bhīṣma, and between the former and the sage Brhaspati, in the Anuśāsana-parvan itself (*Mbh.*, 13.112.3, 10, 13), may only be a figurative way of referring to death, and may contain no suggestion to a specific mode of disposal of the dead body. But, at least from the form it is once put into in the mouth of Brhaspati, casting away of the dead seems to be suggested. The relevant verse, no. 13, reads :

*Mṛtāṁ śarīram utsṛjya kṛś'haloṣṭasamāṁ janāḥ,
Mūhūrtāṁ upatiṣṭhanti tato yānti parāṁ mukhāḥ,
Tais taccharīram utsṛṣṭvāṁ dharma eko'nugacchati.*

the Bhīṣma-parvan, is only in the form of an indirect allusion. Yudhiṣṭhira desired to know about the countries, warriors from which would be participating in the battle, and, in reply, Sañjaya names various countries and makes brief comments about them. In this, in the reference to Uttarakuru, said to be situated by the side, and towards the north, of Meru, the statement is made that there are to be found there certain birds of sharp beaks and great strength which take away or steal dead bodies and throw them on the mountains or in the mountain caves.¹ We feel that we have here an indirect reference to a certain mode of disposal of the dead, which consisted of exposure of the dead body on a high place for birds and beasts to devour, or, in the alternative, to possible cave-burials. This mode, better than any other, invites comparison with the Persian exposure, and, for this reason, the geographical considerations also appear to be important. Uttarakuru is generally introduced in ancient Indian literature as a mythical land, but if it could be identified at all, it would be located somewhere in the high plateau just around the summit of the north-western ranges of the Himalayas.²

¹ Mbh., 6. 8. 11 :

*Bhārūṇā nāma śakunās tikṣṇatundā mahābalaḥ,
Te nirharanti hi mṛtān dariṣu prakṣipanti ca.*

² On Uttarakuru, see Raychaudhuri, H., *Political History of Ancient India*, etc., pp. 64, 157; Sircar, *Studies in the Geography of Ancient and Medieval India*, p. 9, fn. 1; Malalasekera, G. P., *Dictionary of Pali Proper Names*, Vol. I, s. v. "Uttarakuru—1"; Upadhyaya, Bharat Singh, *Buddha-kālina Bhāratīya Bhūgola*, etc., pp. 67ff.; also Mbh., 2.28. 7-20.

In this instance, much more than in that of tree-burial, the *Mahābhārata* evidence is not isolated.¹ Traces of it have been found in the earliest literature of India, and, in later periods, besides the *Mahābhārata*, many other types of literary sources provide evidence for it. Some suggestions of abandonment of the dead have been seen in the hymns of the *Rg-veda*,² but, as already noticed, there are clearer references in the *Atharva-veda*, where the Fire-god is prayed to bring to receive oblations Fathers who were "scattered away" or abandoned (*paroptāḥ*) and who were "set up" in high places (*uddhītāḥ*), besides those who were "burnt" (*dagdhāḥ*) and "buried" in a hole dug in the ground (*nikhātāḥ*).³ The commentary explains *paroptāḥ* as left or abandoned in a distant place like a piece of wood (*dūradeśe kaṣṭhavat*

1. Cf. Basham, *The Wonder that was India*, p. 177.

2. See Pandey, op. cit., pp. 300, 302. It may be noted that the *Rg-veda*, X. 15. 14 refers to *agnidagdhāḥ* and *anagnidagdhāḥ* ancestors in the same breath and apparently on an equal footing. It could be that the word *anagnidagdhāḥ* (lit. 'not burnt in the fire') here refers to earth-burial alone. But it could be understood also in a broader sense, and including exposure, casting away, etc. The *Atharva-veda*, 18. 2. 35, which is partly parallel with *RV.*, X. 15. 14, also refers to the *agnidagdhāḥ* and *anagnidagdhāḥ* ancestors together, and, there too, the latter word, especially when seen in continuation of the preceding verse (18.2.34), seems to have a rather comprehensive sense. Kane (op. cit., p. 232) understands this word in *RV.*, X. 15. 14 in the probable sense of death away from home, at enemy's hands, in a fight or after being kidnapped, when proper cremation or burial could not be performed.

3. *AV.*, 18. 2. 34 (see above, p. 31, fn. 1).

parityaktāḥ).¹ In the *Atharva-veda* also, as in the Vedic literature in general, the usual mode is cremation, but there is no indication here that these other modes were disapproved. A reference to the practice of abandonment at death has been seen also in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*,² although it cannot be said to be free from doubt. The Sūtra literature prescribes only cremation and has provisions for burial in the ground in exceptional cases.³ It does not generally know of abandonment,⁴ which only shows that this mode was fully disapproved in the brahmanical tradition by that time. Apparently, however, it remained a legitimate mode among some people outside the pale of brahmanical orthodoxy.

Considerable evidence of the practice of abandoning dead bodies in cemeteries occurs in the Pāli Buddhist literature. One of the most striking of these is the *Mahāsatipatṭhāna-suttanta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya*, where explaining *Kāyānupassanā* (cultivating 'mindfulness' about the 'body'), the reference is made to the bhikkhus' seeing bodies having been abandoned in the charnel field, one, two, three days or over a longer period, swollen, discoloured, in various stages of decomposition, pecked at by birds and eaten by

1. Cited by Whitney (op. cit.) in the notes to his translation.
2. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, VI. 15. 1-3, as cited in Pandey, op. cit., pp. 337-38.
3. See Pandey, op. cit., p. 305; Apte, V. M., *Social and Religious Life in the Grhya-sūtras*, etc., pp. 251 ff.
4. There is provision sometimes for the abandonment of dead children; see below.

animals, reduced to bare skeletons, etc., and thinking of their own bodies, as similarly constituted and subject to destruction.¹ The *Vijaya-sutta* of the *Sutta-Nipāta* also refers to dead bodies lying cast in cemeteries.² There are several references to this mode of disposal, in the *Jātaka* stories also, which speak also of ogresses, etc., besides animals and birds, feeding on bodies abandoned in cemeteries.³ It was in the face of this impressive evidence that Rhys Davids concluded that while deceased persons of distinction seem to have been cremated, the dead bodies of ordinary people were put away in a public place, a cemetery, where, as a rule, they were not buried but left to be destroyed by birds and beasts or dissipated by the process of natural decay.⁴ For this public place, the Buddhist texts usually have the popular word *susāna* (= skt. *śmaśāna*), but two other equally common words are *āmaka-susāna* and *sīvathikā*. The first of these two words in itself constitutes good evidence for the practice of abandonment, since *āmaka* means 'raw', 'uncooked', and *āmaka-susāna* is to be rendered literally as "the cemetery of raw flesh".⁵

1. *Dīgha Nikāya*, sutta no. XXII (see *Dīgha Nikāya*, PTS. edn., II, pp. 295-7; also tr. *Dialogues of the Buddha*, Part II, pp. 33-3).

2. *Sutta-Nipāta*, l. 11 (*Vijaya-sutta*); also tr. *Woven Cadences of the Early Buddhists*, p. 32.

3. See, e. g., *Sigāla Jātaka*, *Jayaddisa Jātaka* (Nos. 113 and 513 respectively in Fausböll's edn. of the *Jātaka*).

4. Rhys Davids, *Buddhist India*, pp. 36-7.

5. See Rhys Davids, T.W., etc. (ed.), *Pali-English Dictionary* (PTS.), s. v. *susāna* and *āmaka-susāna*. The etymology of the word *sīvathikā* is doubtful; *ibid.*, s. v.

In continuation of the early Buddhist literature, it may be added that Jaina canonical texts like *Mahānisiha* also contain evidence of abandonment of dead bodies in groves or woods.¹

Several foreign sources also provide excellent corroboration for this practice. Thus the *Geography of Strabo*, citing Aristobulus about various curious customs of the people at Taxila, informs that the dead were thrown out to be devoured by vultures.² Similar customs are reported also by the Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang, who observes that the dead bodies were either cremated or thrown into water or cast away in the woods to feed wild animals.³ Albiruni, whose information is most valid for north-western India, which alone was directly observed by him, gives something like a history of the various Indian customs relating to disposal of the dead.⁴ According to him, in the ancient-most times, the

1. See Jain, *Jaina Āgama Sāhitya men Bhāratīya Samāja*, p. 370 and fn. 4.

2. *Geography of Strabo*, Bk. XV. 1, para 62, as in Majumdar, R. C., *The Classical Accounts of India*, etc., p. 276; also Bevan, E. R., in Rapson (ed.), *The Cambridge History of India*, Vol. I, p. 373. According to Bevan, the information is probably about certain people near the frontier who had been influenced by the customs of Iran. It may be noted that Strabo's *Geography* is dated in the 1st quarter of the 1st cent. A. D., and his authority in this case, Aristobulus, is said to have accompanied Alexander in his campaign of India; see Majumdar, *The Classical Accounts of India*, pp. 5 and 93, and Bevan, in Rapson, op. cit., p. 358.

3. See Watters, Thomas, *On Yuan Chwang's Travels in India*, Vol. I, p. 174.

4. See Sachau, Edward C., *Albiruni's India*, etc., Vol. II, pp. 167 ff., 170.

dead were exposed to the air by being thrown on the fields, without any covering, and even sick people were left alone in the fields and mountains to die. As a result of later reformation, the dead were exposed to wind by housing them in airy roofed buildings, similar to the grave-towers of the Zoroastrians. Only much later the practice evolved by which the dead were handed over to fire to be consumed in entirety. The habit of casting off of the dead had apparently not died out completely in Albiruni's time since he adds his concluding remarks that those who could not afford to burn their dead either threw them on the open field or into running water. In the end, we may add that Crooke has noted some modern examples of Indian tribes who practised exposure to beasts and birds.¹

It seems to be generally agreed that the abandonment at death, and perhaps even prematurely when death was felt imminent, was the earliest mode of disposal, and the causes may have been primarily psychological, such as the horror of death and of corpse and the fear of pollution of the living by the dead, but sometimes economic causes were probably just as important, since to sustain life at that early stage was a truly hard task and the living were in every sense more important than the dead.² The

1. Crooke, "Death and Disposal of the Dead : Indian, Non-Aryan", *ERE.*, 4, p. 481; see also Hughes-Buller, R., "Cave Burial in Baluchistan", *Indian Antiquary*, Vol. XXXII, 1903, pp. 342-3.
2. See Hartland, E. S., "Death and Disposal of the Dead: Introduction and Primitive", *ERE.*, 4, pp. 411 ff., esp. p. 414; cf. also Pandey, op. cit., p. 300; Basham, *The Wonder that was India*, p. 177.

progress to next point came when the abandonment was formalized and the survivors put away their dead, leaving the dead bodies intact and with care. It is, properly speaking, from this stage onwards that we can use the word burial.¹ The great many varieties of it must have gradually developed, among different people and under varying circumstances, which embraced such wide divergences as extreme care taken to preserve dead bodies and to obliterate them completely by consigning them to fire.² This sketch of development may be to a certain extent hypothetical, but it is probably not far from the truth. Two things, however, need to be noted about it. Most of these developments appeared very early in human history, and the practice of cremation also is very old and widespread.³ Secondly, even though death releases immensely powerful emotions and customs relating to it are likely to be slow to change, it is a fact that changes do appear. Anthropologists believe that what makes for persistence or change is

1. Cf. Kroeber, A. L., *Anthropology*, p. 625.

2. For the evolution and variety of customs of disposal of the dead body amongst the various peoples of the world, in antiquity and in modern times, see, besides the article by Hartland in *ERE.*, 4, cited already, several other entries on that subject in the same place, and also Hocart, A. M., "Death Customs", in *Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences* (ed. Seligman, Edwin R. A., etc.), Vol. V, pp. 20 ff.; Werblowsky, "Funerary Rites and Customs", in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. 9, pp. 1011 ff.; Kroeber, A. L., "Disposal of the Dead", *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 29, 1927, pp. 308-15; Griffin, James B., "The Study of Early Cultures", in Shapiro, Harry L. (ed.), *Man, Culture, and Society*, pp. 24-5, etc..

3. See esp. Griffin, in Shapiro, op. cit., p. 25.

not so much the strength or weakness of emotions released but rather the closeness or looseness with which the practice concerned is interwoven to other items of the culture, to an organised system of ideas and sentiments, because it is seen that large systems have a tendency to endure.¹ Whatever the precise explanation, it seems undeniable that the practice of abandoning or putting away the dead on open ground appears very early in the history of India and, even though it does not seem to have been the most popular mode, it continued to be practised for some reason by some people in later times also and does so even up till today.

1. See Kroeber, *Anthropology*, pp. 401-2. On the considerable variation and instability of the funerary customs, see also Ucko, 'Ethnography and Archaeological Interpretation of Funerary Remains', *World Archaeology*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1969, pp. 273-4.

CHAPTER V

PROHIBITION OF CREMATION FOR
CHILDREN AND ASCETICS

In the brahmanical tradition, two well known exceptions were prohibition of cremation in the case of children of a certain age, generally under two or three years, and, in that of ascetics, prescription, instead, of some form of burial. The *Mahābhārata* has instances also of such types and they provide corroboration for the ritual prescriptions to a certain extent. The *Śānti-parvan* has a story of the death of a male brāhmaṇa child.¹ The relatives carry the dead body to the cemetery or the cremation ground (*śmaśāna*) sometime in the day, perhaps shortly before the sunset. A vulture (*gr̥dhra*) and a jackal (*jambuka*), look for a chance to feed on the dead body of the child. The vulture would be lucky if he got his chance while it was still day, but the jackal had to wait the onset of the night. A war of wits follows. Taking turns, these two carnivores advise the relatives either to overcome their infatuation, leave the dead and return home, or to stay on as long as it was still day, hoping that life might yet return to the dead child. Both, as the story goes, are disappointed, because, happily, the dead child is revived by divine grace. But the whole episode

1. *Mbh.*, 12. Ch. 149. This story is also introduced as *purātana itihāsa*, and illustrates how even a dead person could be revived by the grace of God.

would perhaps confirm that young children were not cremated in ancient times; their dead bodies were abandoned or accorded some form of burial.¹ If burial cannot be directly inferred in our story, it must be remembered that even in the brahmanical tradition, while the general rule appears to have been to bury the dead child in a hole dug in the ground, there was no unanimity about it, and even as respected an authority as *Manu Smṛti* prescribes abandonment, like a piece of wood, in a forest outside the village.² It is interesting to note that in the present story also, while the relatives are frequently changing their minds, there is recurrent mention of depositing or throwing of the dead body on the ground (*kṣīpya*) or abandoning it (*tyaktvā, parityajya*). Further, the *śmaśāna* is located in a forested region and there is suggestion of its being desolate. The last rites, of whatever kind, have been called *preta-kārya*.

The description of the death of Vidura in the *Āśramavāsika-parvan* brings out the essential element in the disposal of the body of a dead

1. For the disposal of the dead body of a young child as prescribed in the brahmanical tradition, see Pandey, *Hindū Samskāra*, etc., pp. 340-1; Kane, *History of Dharmasāstra*, Vol. IV, pp. 227-8.

2. Pandey, op. cit., p. 340. *Manu Smṛti*, V. 68-69 read as :

*Unadvīdārīkam pretam nidadhyuḥ vāndhavā bahih,
Alaṁkṛtya śucau bhūmāv asthisāncayanādṛte.* 68

3. *Nāsyā kārya'gnisamskāro na ca kāryodakakriyā,
Aranye kṣāṣṭhavat tyaktvā kṣāpeyus tryahameva ca.* 69.

ascetic.¹ Vidura is portrayed in this place as engaged in intense ascetic practices. He had matted locks on the head, held a piece of wood or metal in his mouth as a form of penance, had discarded all clothes and was covered with dirt. He abstained from all food, lived only by "eating air" and had become so thin and emaciated as to be a shadow-like apparition. He would be only rarely seen and it was with some effort that Yudhiṣṭhira was able to catch sight of him.² Yudhiṣṭhira is then said to have anxiously followed Vidura when the latter entered a dense forest. Finally, Vidura stationed himself against a tree, and, while the Pāṇḍava prince was introducing himself, the sage stared deep into his eyes and, entering into Yudhiṣṭhira's body by the mystic power of Yoga, he breathed his last.³ It was when Yudhiṣṭhira was getting ready to cremate the dead body of Vidura that he heard the heavenly voice commanding not to do so. He was told that since Vidura was a follower of *yati-dharma*, his body was not to be burnt; such is the eternal law. He was assured that Vidura would obtain the heavenly

1. *Mbh.*, 15. Ch. 33, esp. verses 30-32. Sukhamaya Bhattacharya has also noted it; see his *Mahābhārata-kāṭina Samāja*, p. 340. After the conclusion of the great battle, when Yudhiṣṭhira was installed king and had already ruled for some years, the old king Dhṛtarāṣṭra retired to the forest. He was accompanied by his wife Gandhārī, and also by Kuntī, Sañjaya and Vidura. It is here that Vidura takes to severe austerities, and is already dying when the Pāṇḍavas visit him. The *Āśramavāsika-parvan* relates all this story.

2. *Mbh.*, 15. 33. 14-19.

3. *Ibid.*, 15. 33. 20-28.

Prohibition of Cremation

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abodes called *Santānaka*. Yudhiṣṭhira obeyed the command and returned.¹ There is no mention here of burial or any attempt to dispose of the body of Vidura. The description is in full agreement with the prescriptions of ritual texts insofar as the prohibition of cremation for ascetics is concerned. But while the ritual prescriptions speak of burial in the ground, no such thing is mentioned in the epic description.² On the contrary, it is expressly noted that the dead body of Vidura would stay as it was. As it is, it would appear to be a special case of formal abandonment.³

1. Ibid., 15. 33. 30-32 :

*Dharmarājas tu tatrainān saṁcaskārayiṣus tadā,
Dagdhukīmo' bhavad vidvān atha vai vāg abhīṣata. 30
Bho bho rajan na dagdhavyam etad vidurasamjñakam,
Kalevaram ihaitat te dharma eṣa sandatanah. 31
Lokaḥ santānakā nṛma bhaviṣyanty asya pārthiva,
Yatidharmam avāpto' sau naiva śocyah paramtapa. 32*

2. For the ritual prescriptions regarding the disposal of the dead body of an ascetic, see Kane, op. cit., Vol. IV, pp. 229-31; Pandey, op. cit., pp. 341-43.
3. Whether any meaning is to be read in the repeated reference to Vidura standing motionless against a tree, his expiring in the same pose (*Mbh.*, 15. 33. 21, 27), and the heavenly announcement that his body would stay where it was (ibid., verse 31), is difficult to say; cf. Vaidya, *Mahābhārata-mīmāṃsā*, p. 474. Incidentally, it makes an interesting contrast that in Buddhism and Jainism, cremation was generally practised for monks as well as for laymen; see Rhys Davids, *Buddhist India*, pp. 36-7; Poussin, "Death and Disposal of the Dead : Buddhist", *ERE.*, 4, p. 446; Kane, op. cit., Vol. IV, pp. 234-5; Jain, *Jaina Āgama Sahitya men Bhāratiya Samāja*, pp. 369 ff.; also Rahula, Walpola, *History of Buddhism in Ceylon: the Anuradhapura Period*, pp. 285-6; Geiger, Wilhelm, *Culture of Ceylon in Mediaeval Times*, pp. 40-1; Werblowsky, "Funerary Rites and Customs", in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. 9, p. 1017.

CHAPTER VI

MASS CREMATIONS FOR THE DEAD
OF WAR

The *Mahābhārata*, by its very nature, refers to the death of many warriors in battle and naturally, therefore, also to the disposal of a number of dead bodies at the same time. The descriptions, it scarcely needs to be added, are fantastic when it comes to numbers, but since a long drawn battle is the central theme of the epic story, its bearing on our subject is naturally of special interest. Also, irrespective of the question where there ever was a real Mahābhārata war, our epic material would still be good evidence of actual practices on the assumption that wars were a fact of life then, as unfortunately they are even now. As it will be seen below, the brahmanical texts do take notice also of death in battle, and take a certain position in their prescriptions, but they do not seem to imagine the need of disposal of many dead at the same time. Apparently, their scope is strictly individualistically oriented.

The information about the disposal of the bodies of a number of persons killed in battles is available principally in the Strī-parvan—one of the most poignant sections of the epic story,¹ in which Gāndhārī and other Kaurava ladies, etc., visit the

1. Cf. Winternitz, *A History of Indian Literature*, Vol. I, Pt. II, p. 325.

battleground at the conclusion of the great war and witness with horror and anguish their dear ones lying dead all around.¹ It contains a fairly long description of the cremation of the dead heroes on the instructions of the king Yudhiṣṭhira and following suggestions to that effect made by the old king Dhṛtarāṣṭra.² The description is a continuous one but brings out, as we shall see presently, an interesting distinction, thereby suggesting two different types of disposals. We are first told that by the orders of Dharmarāja, Sudharmā, Dhaumya, Sūta Sañjaya, Vidura, etc., collected *candana*, clarified butter, oil, many scented materials, silken clothes, much wood, etc., also parts of broken chariots and various types of weapons. They then carefully set up with them funeral pyres and, following an order of priority, burnt the bodies of the princes in accordance with the prescribed rules (*vidhidṛṣṭena karmaṇā*) and with tranquil mind.³ In the sequel, names of

1. *Mbh.*, 11. Chs. 9ff., esp. Chs. 16 ff., most of which is a long lament put in the mouth of Gāndhārī.

2. *Mbh.*, 11. Ch. 26.

3. *Ibid.*, 11. 26.27-30 :

*Śaśanād dharmarājasya kṣatta sūtaś ca sañjayaḥ,
Sudharmā dhaumyasahita indrasenādayas tathā.* 27

*Candanagurukāṣṭhāni tathā kalyakanyuta,
Ghṛtaṁ tailaṁ ca gandhamś ca kṣaumaṇi vaśāṇi ca.* 28

*Samahṛtya mahārhaṇi darūṇāṁ caiva saṁcayan,
Rathamś ca mṛditaṁś tatra pāṇāpraharaṇāni ca.* 29

*Citāḥ kṛtvā prayāgnena yathā mukhyaṁ parādhipān,
Dahayāmasūr avyagrā vidhidṛṣṭena karmaṇā.* 30

We differ here from 'Hopkins' rendering of the verse 30. For fuller discussion and our reasons for differing, see below (p. 54, fn. 1).

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dead princes are noted, starting with Duryodhana, with his brothers mentioned in a round, general way, and including about thirty names, some in singular, others in plural. This is followed by the expression that the bodies of these and many others, numbering thousands, were burnt in fire fed by streams of melted ghee.¹ However, towards the close of this description of cremation on a mass scale, we have another very interesting statement, namely that, thereafter, the dead bodies of those killed who had no claimants or surviving relatives and who had come from various countries and regions were collected, thousands of heaps were made of them and, following instructions of the king, Vidura burnt them on funeral pyres set up with much wood soaked in oil.² Having got the funeral rites performed in this manner, Yudhiṣṭhira is said to have turned towards the river Ganges, keeping Dhṛtarāṣṭra ahead of him.³

In the discussion of the epic sources on the disposal of the bodies of persons killed in battles, we may notice also certain material in the Śānti-parvan, which is not a description of an event but a brief statement, almost prescriptive in tone. Here, in a so-

1. *Mbh.*, 11. 26. 31 ff.; verse 38 reads as :

*Anyamś ca pāṭhivān rājān śataś'c'cha sahasraś'ch,
Gṛtadhārā hutair dīptaiḥ pāvakaiḥ samadāhayan.*

2. *Ibid.*, 11.26. 42-43 :

*Ye cōpy anāṣṭhās tatrāsan nānādeśasamāgatāḥ.
Tāmś ca sarvān samānāyya rāṣṭrān kṛtvā sahasraś'ch. 42.
Citvā dūrubbhir avyagrah prabhūtaiḥ snehatāpitaiḥ,
Dahayāmasa viduro dharmarājasya śasanāt. 43*

3. *Ibid.*, 11.26. 44.

called 'old history', Indra explains to Ambariṣa that the latter's commander of the army had preceded an ideal king like him to the heaven because he had earned the supreme merit of a kṣatriya warrior, which was to engage, and lose one's life, in battle for a just cause; such an engagement, it is emphasized, is a veritable *yajña*.¹ Indra's explanation in this story contains also the interesting statement: "The deaths of heroes in battle should not be mourned. Such heroes are (promptly) established in the heaven. They (the surviving relatives) do not wish to make offerings of food and water to them, nor of observing the customary mourning and the purificatory bath. Listen from me about the worlds attained by such heroes."² There is, of course, no reference to any mode of disposal of the dead body in this statement, but inference of that nature has been drawn from it, by Vaidya, which will be discussed below.

One more instance from the *Mahābhārata* may be noticed which, though not a regular battle description of the usual type in the epic, nevertheless refers to the violent deaths of many persons at the same time and the disposal of their dead bodies. It is the story of the death of the Kīcakas at the hands of

1. *Mbh.*, 12. Ch. 99.

2. *Ibid.*, 12. 99. 43-44 :

Āhave nihataṁ śūraṁ na śoceta katarācana,

Āsocyo hi hataḥ śūraḥ svargaloke mahīyate. 43

Na hy annaṁ nodakam itasya na snānaṁ nāpy āśaucakam,

Haśasya kartum icchanti tasya lokāṁ śṛṇusva me. 44

Bhīma in the Virāṭa-parvan.¹ In short, Kīcaka, who was both the brother-in-law and commander-in-chief of Virāṭa, made illicit proposals to Draupadī, who, like her five husbands, was living incognito, as a maid-servant in the royal harem. Draupadī complained to Bhīma, who arranged with her to lure Kīcaka to a secret meeting and in this way killed him. Kīcaka's kinsmen, who are called Upa-kīcakas and Sūta-putras, were so enraged at this that they decided to burn Draupadī alive with the dead body of Kīcaka, and even got the permission of the king for this. It is while they were forcibly carrying Draupadī that Bhīma intercepted them and by uprooting trees and using them as weapon he killed all of them. These kinsmen are counted as 105 in number. We are told in the sequel that on receiving the information, king Virāṭa was alarmed, and before taking steps to pacify Draupadī, he promptly issued orders to perform the funeral ceremony (*paramā-kriyā*) of the Sūtas or Kīcakas and to burn them all together on one funeral pyre, using various precious and fragrant objects.² It needs to be emphasized that the king's order is explicit about the collective cremation in one fire.

1. See *Mbh.*, Virāṭa-parvan, Chs. 13ff. for the full story, and Chs. 21-22 for the encounter between Bhīma and the Kīcakas.

2. *Mbh.*, 4.23.6-7; the two verses read as :
Teṣāṃ tad vāsanāṃ śrutvā virāṭo vāhipatīḥ,
Abravit kriyatāṃ eṣāṃ sūtānāṃ paramakriyā. 6
Ekasminn eva te sarve suśamiddhe hutāśane,
Dahyantāṃ kīcakāḥ śighraṇ ratnair gandhais ca
sarvaśaḥ. 7

If we analyse the above material, more than one mode of disposal of the many dead of battles is suggested and, *prima facie*, there seems no reason to doubt that they were actually practised as the situation demanded. These modes may be stated briefly as : (a) the dead of battle were simply often abandoned; (b) attempts were made to recover the bodies, and, in the case of important persons, separate funerals were arranged; and (c) the rest of the recovered dead were accorded communal cremation.

Howsoever modest a picture we draw of wars in ancient India, it must be accepted as true that fairly large number of people participated in them and many lost their lives, and that these warriors came from many families and different districts, regions or countries. There must have been genuine problems of recovering the dead bodies and identifying them. Under the circumstances, proper cremations could have been accorded only in a limited number of cases, where for reasons of importance of the persons concerned, special efforts were made to recover the bodies and identify them. The only thing that seems to have marked such otherwise usual cremations was that several were performed at the same time and the same site. Understandably, this is likely to have been done in a combined, co-operative way by the surviving relatives. The Strī-parvan evidence seems to be quite clear that, in a situation like this, some order of priority was followed in setting up the funeral pyres and performing the cremations. A large number of the dead, however, would still have been

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left, who could not be identified for one reason or the other and in whose case there were also no surviving relatives left or immediately available to claim the bodies and perform the last rites. Mass cremations seem to have been arranged in such cases. Dead bodies were piled up in heaps on funeral pyres and burnt together.¹ It is difficult to say whether, from the graphic description of their violent death

1. It will be easily seen that we make a distinction between the nature of cremation envisaged in the *Mbh.*, 11.26. 27 ff., esp. verses 27-30 (see above, p. 49, fn. 3) on the one hand, and verses 42-43 on the other, and we differ from Hopkins' rendering of the verse 30, in his *Social and Military Position of the Ruling Caste*, etc., p. 115, foot-note. Hopkins renders the verse to mean: "The dead are heaped by rank on piles (pyres) and burned." It appears to us that the phrase "heaped by rank on piles (pyres)" has no clear justification in the text, and that both the words, "heaped" and "piles", are confusing. More accurate translation would be: "Having made their pyres carefully, in order of priority, (they) cremated those kings with tranquil mind and in accordance with the prescribed rules." This would be the natural rendering on two other counts also. Firstly, "heaped by rank on piles" does not appear to make any sense, even when we understand "pyres" by "piles", because how is such heaping "according to ranking" or priority possible? Secondly, since many actual names and some important ones, like Duryodhana, follow this statement, the idea of "heaping" or "piles" sounds unnatural. It is to be noted that identification of dead persons is here clearly implied, both in the talk of "ranks" and in the mention of several names. So the sense is: in the case of dead heroes who were identified, the funeral pyres were set up and cremations performed in a certain order of priority, that is, the important and senior ones looked after first and the minor ones attended to later. This cremation was, therefore, different from that accorded the unidentified and unclaimed dead of the wars (described in the verses 42-43), who were burned in "heaps".

at the hands of Bhīma, problems of identification could be inferred in the instance of the Kīcakas too. Perhaps they were accorded a collective cremation simply in view of the large number and, it seems, also because they belonged to the same family. This confirms that when the bodies were recovered after battles, collective cremation for them was the general practice, whether the dead were properly identified or not. Separate cremations at the same site in some order of priority were rather exceptional. Further, we may also presume that the mass cremations were done entirely with State support and management. Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Yudhiṣṭhira are portrayed anxious to get the last rites performed for all and in the descriptions there are constant references to the instructions of the king.¹

The above two, slightly differing, modes appear in the descriptions of the Strī-parvan to cover all cases of the dead of the great war. Presumably, any other alternative was so abhorrent to the brāhmanical redactors of the epic that they could not help create that impression and imagined cremation for all, howsoever cursory.² But apparently it cannot be so. We may be sure that bodies of many heroes were lost beyond recovery and there was a good number of unaccounted dead. On their visit

1. See *Mbh.*, 11.26. 21-26; note *śāsanād dharmaṛājasya* in the verse 27, and exactly similar phrase in the verse 43 (see above, p. 49, fn. 3 & p. 50, fn. 2). Some degree of State support may be presumed also in the former case, and on the same grounds.
2. See below, for the position taken in the brahmanical ritual texts in this regard.

to the battlefield, Gāndhārī, etc., are said to have witnessed a ghastly scene—decapitated bodies lying all around and vultures and animals feeding on them.¹ It is true that the dead heroes were often abandoned by compulsion,² and this cannot be called a formal disposal of the dead body. But it was apparently commonly practised in the emergencies of wars, and Vaidya was very right when he cited in support of such an inference the cryptic statement of the Śānti-parvan, which is apparently a rationalization of this practice.³

Interesting confirmation of this practice, it may be noted, comes from Hiuen Tsang. In an obvious reference to Kurukṣetra and the Mahābhārata war, the Chinese pilgrim records that so many people died in this war that proper disposal could not be accorded them and huge heaps of skeletons were still lying there.⁴ The testimony is palpably false, considering the impossibility of preservation of such heaps in Hiuen Tsang's time, should they be presumed to have actually been left there. But it is not impossible that the Chinese pilgrim saw some

1. See esp. *Mbh.*, 11. Ch. 16. Expressions of similar type occur also in the following chapters; cf. 11.26.23.

2. Cf. *Mbh.*, 8. 14.56 (Vāsudeva saying to Arjuna) :

*Parityajya priyān anye bāndhavān bāndhavapriya,
Vyutkrāntāḥ samadīśyanta tatra tatra mahāraneḥ*

3. See Vaidya, *Mahābhārata-mīmāṃsā*, pp. 286-7, 473-4, commenting on *Mbh.* (Bombay edn.), 12.98.45 (= Cr. edn. 12.99.43-44, cited above, p. 51, fn. 2); also Pusal-kar, "Social World in the *Mahābhārata*", *Jour. of the Ganganatha Jha Res. Inst.*, XXVI, 1970, p. 579.

4. See Watters, *On Yuan Chwang's Travels in India*, etc., Vol. 1, p. 315.

mounds which were locally believed to be heaps of skeletons of the Mahābhārata heroes. His testimony, thus, proves the existence of a tradition in his time that many dead of the great war were abandoned in the battleground where they fell.

As hinted at already, we find only limited corroboration in the dharmasāstric or ritual texts for the information gleaned from the epic as above. There seems to be no sanction in these texts for abandoning slain warriors on the battleground, nor are there any rules, to our knowledge, permitting communal cremation in heaps. Only the usual cremation is imagined for the dead of battle, but here again, there is no awareness of a number of dead at the same time or arrangement of their cremations all at one time and place and following some order of precedence. The texts do take cognizance of the special nature of death while fighting in battles and make provision for it. While as a general rule the brahmanical texts forbid cremation, with its accompanying formalities, for persons who have met untimely or unnatural death,¹ the death

1. See Kane, *History of Dharmasāstra*, Vol. IV, pp. 222-3; and Pandey, *Hindū Saṃskara*, pp. 344-5, where various sources are cited. *Vaikhānasa Smārta-sūtra*, V. 11 gives a long list of persons who must not be cremated. In view of specific statements of opposite nature in several texts and certain exemptions (to be noted presently, in the sequel), the *śāstra-hata* ("killed by weapon") in this list cannot be interpreted to mean killed by weapon in battle. It must be noted, however, that the brahmanical attitude is not always uniform in such restrictions or their exceptions. Note, e.g., that death by lightning-strike figures in the list of apparently unworthy deaths in the *Vaikh.*

in war is deemed free from these restrictions, apparently because no taint or unworthiness generally attaches to it.¹ On the contrary, such a death could be quite praiseworthy. This idea is brought out also in exemptions of a different nature. It was believed that there was no *śāuca* or pollution and customary period of mourning, etc., imposed on the relatives by the death of a person who laid his life in battle for the sake of "cows and brāhmaṇas", or the pollution could be washed off instantly by the briefest of ritual formalities (*sadyah śāuca*).² In this alone do we find some echo of the sentiments of the Śānti-parvan statement,³ but, as already remarked, this attitude, reflected both in the epic

Smṛta-sūtra, but, according to *Manu Smṛti* (V. 95) and *Tājñavalkya Smṛti* (III. 27), such a death did not cause *śāuca* for the surviving relatives.

1. See *Baudhāyana Pitrmedha-sūtra*, III.7.2 : *Deśantaramṛte saṁgrāmahate vyāghrahate śarīramādāya vidhinā dahayet*; also Pandey, op. cit., p. 345. It must be emphasized, however, that even when the brahmanical texts refer to, approvingly, the death of warriors in battles, and have specific prescriptions for it, the topic figures in them only in a very minor way.
2. See Kane, op. cit., Vol. IV, pp. 305-6, where several authorities are cited, including *Gautama Dharma-sūtra*, *Manu Smṛti*, *Tājñavalkya Smṛti*, etc. *Manu Smṛti*, V. 94-95 run as :

*Rājño mahātmike sthāne sadyahśaucam vidhiyate,
Prajānam parirakṣartham āsanam cātra karanam. 94*

*Dimbhā havahatānam ca vidyutā pārthivena ca,
Gobrāhmaṇasya caivārthe yasya cecchati pārthivah. 95*

Similarly, *Tājñavalkya Smṛti*, III. 27 reads :
*Mahapatānam nāśaucam hatānam vidyutā tathā,
Gobrāhmaṇartham saṁgrāme yasya cecchati bhūmipah.*

3. *Mbh.*, 12.99. 43-44 (see above, p. 51, fn. 2).

and the dharmasāstric sources, may be simply a rationalization of the actual practice of abandonment of the dead heroes in the battlefield.¹

1. Incidentally, similar practice is followed also in the modern conditions of war. As it happens with the Indian army, adequate steps are taken to ensure that the dead of war are easily identified. Then, if the next of kin do not appear in time to claim the bodies, collective or communal disposals are arranged. Needless to say, even the communal disposals respect religious sentiments and the army units maintain their chaplains. A curious Thai Buddhist custom may also be noted. The bodies of those who die in accidents or in hospitals on account of illness and have no relatives to perform the normal rites are buried for a time, and then periodically the bones are dug up, heaped in huge piles and cremated. (see *The Hindustan Times*, March 28, 1977, news item by Reuter; cf. Werblowsky, in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. 9, p. 1017).

CHAPTER VII

CREMATION OF PĀṆDU

We have reserved for special discussion at the end the cremation of Pāṇḍu as described in the Ādi-parvan. A passing reference has been made to it above as one of the several instances in the epic where more or less detailed descriptions of cremation are available, and, in fact, a superficial reading of it may create the impression that there was apparently nothing striking in it beyond providing, in a somewhat detailed manner, a description of cremation as ordinarily practised. A closer study, however, reveals that we are here dealing with an exceptional circumstance relating to cremation. This point was missed by some earlier authorities, who, therefore, also made unwarranted comments on the originality and credibility of the whole narrative. Since the relevant passages do present problems of interpretation, we have chosen to discuss them at some length.

The context is of the death of Pāṇḍu away from his capital and in a mountainous resort in the Himalayas¹ and of the subsequent cremation of his dead body. The chapter 116 of the Ādi-parvan describes the infatuation of the king towards his wife Mādrī in the romantic season of the spring, his cohabiting with her despite her resistance and dying

1. This mountainous resort is called Śataśṛṅga; see *M bh.*, 1. 110.42-45; 115.27; 117.20.

in the process on account of a certain curse. Further, it records a dialogue between the two bereaved wives, Kuntī and Mādri, as to who should mount the funeral pyre with the dead husband, the agreement being reached finally over the name of the younger wife. The final verse of the chapter records in unambiguous terms that Mādri entered the funeral fire with the dead king.¹ It appears curious, therefore, that the next chapter, no. 117, opens with the statements that the god-like sages of that mountainous resort performed the last rites of Pāṇḍu (*pāṇḍor avabhṛtham kṛtvā*), assembled and took counsel, and marched with the 'body' of the king and with his wife and children to the capital city Hāstīnapura² to hand them over to Bhīṣma and Dhṛtarāṣṭra.³ It is mentioned further in this context that Kuntī, excited about the return home, did not mind the long trip and before long reached

1. *Mbh.*, 1. 116. 31 :

*Ityuktvā taṁ citāgnisthāṁ dharmapatnī nararṣabham,
Madrarājātmajā tūrṇam anvārohad yaśasvinī.*

2. On the name "Hāstīnapura" of the capital city, see "Additional Note" at the end (pp. 70-1).

3. *Mbh.*, 1. 117. 1-6. The verses 1 and 4-6 read as follows :

*Pāṇḍor avabhṛtham kṛtvā devakalpā maharṣayah,
Tato mantram akurvanta te sametya tapasvinah. 1*

*Te parasparam āmantrya sarvabhūtaḥite rataḥ,
Pāṇḍoḥ putrān puraskṛtya nagarāṁ nāgasāhwayam. 4*

*Udāramāṇasaḥ siddhā gamāne cakṛire manah,
Bhīṣmāya pāṇḍavān dātum dhṛtarāṣṭrāya caiva hi. 5*

*Tasmīn eva kṣaṇe sarve tā ādāya prastāshire,
Pāṇḍor dāraṁś ca putrāṁś ca śatṛāṁ caiva tāpasah. 6*

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the main gate of the city.¹ Having thus arrived and been received by the kinsmen of the dead Pāṇḍu and the citizens,² the sages reported about the king's stay in their midst, living the life of a *brahmācārī*, his nevertheless begetting mighty sons through miraculous means (*divyena hetunā*), and, of his expiring seventeen days before that date.³ The verses nos. 28-31, which too are part of the report by the sages, go on to say : "Mādrī, seeing him (i. e. her dead husband) lying on the funeral pyre to be offered into the mouth of the fire, herself entered the fire and ended her life. She thus went with him and obtained her 'husband's station'. Whatever rites remain to be done for her and for him may now be done. Here are their two 'bodies' and here their worthy sons. These sons, the scourges of their enemies, with their mother, may be received with appropriate rites. After the conclusion of the *pretakārya*, Pāṇḍu ... may obtain *pitṛmedha*, or legitimate ancestral offerings."⁴ The sages depart after having made these statements.

1. *Mbh.*, 1. 117. 7-8.

2. *Ibid.*, 1. 117. 9 ff.

3. *Ibid.*, 1. 117. 19 ff. The verse 27 reads as follows :
Vartamānaḥ satam vṛtte putralābham avāpya ca,
Pitṛlokaṁ gataḥ pāṇḍuḥ itaḥ sapta-dāśe'hani.

4. *Ibid.*, 1. 117. 28-31 :

Tam itāgatam ājñāya vaiśvānaramukhe hutaṁ,
Praviṣṭa pāvakaṁ mādrī hitvā jvitaṁ ātmanaḥ. 28
Sa gata saha tenaiva patilokaṁ anuvrata,
Tasyās tasya o yat kāryaṁ kriyata tad anantaram. 29
Ime tayoh śarīre dve sutaśceme tayor varāḥ,
Kriyābhīr anugṛhyantāṁ saha mātṛā paramtapāḥ. 30
Pretakāryaṁ ca nirvṛtte pitṛmedham mahāyasaḥ,
Labhataṁ sarvadharmajñāḥ pāṇḍuḥ kurukulodvahaḥ. 31

The next chapter, no. 118, smoothly picks up the thread and describes the funeral rites of Pāṇḍu and Mādri in fair detail, including the preparation and decoration of the two 'bodies', carrying them in a procession in an ornamented *śibikā* to the accompaniment of music, etc., depositing them in a pleasant grove on the banks of the Ganges, performing certain rites of ablution, purification and anointment, and finally burning them on the funeral pyre.¹ There is reference to the subsequent performance of *udakakriyā* by all the relatives, including the ladies of the Kuru family,² and, still later, on return, of the relatives and the residents of the capital city sleeping on the ground. There is mention in this context also of the ritual observance of twelve nights.³

It must be accepted that the entire description, from the death of Pāṇḍu in the Himalayan resort to his elaborate funeral by the relatives and others in the capital city, appears curious at the first sight and

1. *Mbh.*, 1. 118. 1ff., esp. 5ff. The description of the preparation, procession, etc. is throughout quite realistic and the dead king and his wife are frequently referred to by name. The verse no. 18, and also 23, may be reproduced which refer directly to the so-called 'bodies' of Pāṇḍu and Mādri :

*Tatas tasya śarīraṃ tat sarvagandhaniṣevitam,
 Śucikṛtīyakādigḍhaṃ mukhyaśānanādhivasitam,
 Paryāśiṇcaṃ jalenāśu śatakumbhamayair ghaṭaiḥ. 18*

*Tatas tayoh śarīre te dṛṣṭvā mohavaśaṃ gatā,
 Hā hā putreti kauśalyā papāta sahasā bhuvi. 23*

2. *Mbh.*, 1. 118. 27-28.
3. *Ibid.*, verses 29-30. *Mbh.*, 1. 119. 1-3 describe the performance of the *śrāddha* of Pāṇḍu and the return of the relatives to Hāstinapura.

needs explanation. It is not surprising, therefore, that the episode attracted the attention of some noted authorities on the *Mahābhārata*, even though, as we shall see presently, they did not explain the apparent anomaly satisfactorily. Hopkins noted very early the incongruity of the description of Pāṇḍu's cremation twice over—once in the forest and again in Hāstinapura, and from the elaborate description of the funeral rites in the capital, he inferred that in this latter account clearly no former burning is imagined. Hopkins' explanation was that two accounts are evidently confounded in the epic narrative.¹ Meyer has commented on this episode in a little greater detail.² He also found the cryptic statement that "Mādrī climbed swiftly up to her dead husband as he lay on the funeral pyre" enigmatic and at odds with the description in the following chapters of the bringing of the two corpses and burning them with all the proper ceremonies. Remark- ing in passing that this body-burning "must now be thought of as carried out only on what is left of the bones, though this does not agree very well with the actual account", Meyer also suspected that the whole was probably an account "patched together from different versions". He was uncertain, however, as to how this was done or what the different probable versions were. He felt that the idea of Mādrī

1. Hopkins, *Social and Military Position of the Ruling Caste*, etc., p. 116, foot-note.

2. See Meyer, J. J., *Sexual Life in Ancient India*, etc., p. 236, esp. fn. 2. This study of Meyer is principally based on the epics *Mahābhārata* and *Ramayana*.

burning herself with the dead Pāṇḍu might have been borrowed from the example of the brāhmaṇa's wife in the story of king Kalmāṣapāda (which appears a little later in the same parvan),¹ although while it all happened naturally in the brāhmaṇa wife's case, "for Mādri was the wood-pile inserted for better or worse." On the other hand, he thought it also probable that there was a version of the Pāṇḍu's story in which the final burial was carried out at once in the forest. Mādri's "fiery" death would quite fit in with that, but "there was an unwillingness to lose the solemn and splendid public ceremony."

The tract presented problems of interpretation also to the editors of the critical edition of the *Mahābhārata*. It is remarkable that while explaining the method of reconstruction and the various difficulties encountered, the late V. S. Sukthankar, who edited the Ādi-parvan, specifically noted this instance as one of the anomalies of the epic.² Sukthankar also noted the contradiction of the cremations of Pāṇḍu and his wife in two different places and at two different times. Highlighting the nature of this contradiction, he pointed to the elaborate funeral described in the chapter 118, referred especially to

1. Dilating on the theme that the disturbance of the enjoyment of sex was considered especially inhuman, Meyer first cites the Kalmāṣapāda's story, and then the, "in parts, very clumsy", legend of Pāṇḍu, suspecting the latter to be an imitation of the former; see Meyer, op. cit., pp. 233 ff. For Kalmāṣapāda legend, see *Mbh.*, 1, Chs. 166 ff., esp. Ch. 173 which contains the story referred to here.

2. *Mbh.*, Ādi-parvan (ed. V. S. Sukthankar), "Prolegomena", p. lxxxvii

the verse 20 which said that, dressed and anointed, the dead king looked as if he were alive,¹ and felt convinced on that basis that no former burning was imagined. Also, he cited approvingly Hopkins' comments : "...there could not have been much corpse left or not enough to dress and smear with sandal paste!"² Sukthankar felt constrained to retain the supposed anomaly in the critical edition because it had the full support of the manuscript evidence, i. e., the so-called anomalous stanzas were uniformly represented in the manuscripts of the Northern and the Southern versions of the epic. Since this was the paramount criteria of his reconstruction, too sacrosanct to be tampered with, he could not do otherwise. However, as the contradiction appeared glaring to him, he noticed it specifically in the now deservedly famous "Prolegomena" to his edition of the Ādi-parvan. He even took the diaskeuasts of the epic to task by charging that they "did not always employ great art in conflating two discrepant accounts of an incident."³ Like Hopkins again, Sukthankar also obviously suspected that separate accounts are confused here. Although he did not identify the earlier hypothetical versions, his explanation, presumably, was that there were two independent versions of the cremation of Pāṇḍu

1. The full verse 1. 118. 20 reads :

*Athainait deśajaiḥ śuklāir vāsobhiḥ samayojayan,
Acchannah sa tu vāsobhir ivann iya naraśabhaḥ,
Śuśubhe puruṣāvyaḡhro mahārha śayanvītaḥ.*

2. See Hopkins, cited above (p. 64, fn. 1).

3. See Sukthankar, "Prolegomena" (cited above, p. 65, fn. 2), p. lxxxvii.

—one in which there was only a brief notice and the king was cremated away from home and another, giving elaborate description of the cremation, which took place in the vicinity of the capital city; and, later, when the two versions were conflated, this was done rather carelessly, without removing the apparent contradiction of cremation twice over.¹ It may be added that in his cultural study of the *Mahābhārata*, V. S. Agrawala also commented on the episode of Pāṇḍu's death and cremation, and he too resolved the apparent anomaly by supposing that, following his death, Pāṇḍu had already been cremated in the Himalayan forests, and the story of the 'body' being brought to Hāstinapura and re-cremated there was added only later.² Agrawala does suggest that, as seen in early Buddhist literature, the word *śarīra* was used technically for bone-relics, and the ascetics brought only these to the capital, but this does not affect his main explanation.

It may be noticed that Pāṇḍu's death and cremation away from home are mentioned also in an earlier chapter of the *Ādi-parvan*, in which Vaiśampāyana tells Janamejaya about the latter's ancestral history.³ There is mention of the curse on Pāṇḍu, his begetting children through *niyoga*,

1. This, as seen above, is also the explanation of Meyer. Meyer is cited by Sukthankar only in the "Addenda et Corrigenda" to his Cr. edn. of the *Ādi-parvan* (see *Mbh.*, Cr. edn., Vol. I, pt. II, p. 994, additional notes on I. 117. 30 a), but apparently he generally approved also of Meyer's arguments.

2. See Agrawala, V. S., *Bhārata-Savitri*, Vol. I, pp. 104-5.

3. See *Mbh.*, I. Ch. 90.

his death as a result of the curse, and of Pāṇḍu being cremated and Mādri mounting the funeral pyre with him. It is also clearly said that the five young Pāṇḍavas and Kuntī were brought by the ascetics to Hāstinapura and handed over to Bhīṣma and Vidura.¹ There is no mention of another cremation or funeral ceremony for the dead king. Hopkins, Meyer, Sukthankar or Agrawala make no reference to this in their explanations,² and, in our opinion, rightly. It is only a brief ancestral history that is presented here, and non-mention of the fuller story, as later, proves nothing, that is, nothing of the kind that it presents an earlier version of the incident. In fact, it may even be that this chapter, presenting as it does a condensed version of a long story or genealogy of the Pāṇḍavas, which continues up to Janamejaya and his sons, is actually a relatively late portion of the epic. The presence of a *phalaśruti* at the end of the chapter and a prefatory request from Janamejaya in the beginning that he wished to hear again in greater detail about his ancestors, confirm this suspicion.³ As we have seen, the objections of the above scholars

1. *Ibid.*, I 90. 73-77.

2. Only Meyer invites comparison with this earlier occurrence, in the additional notes in his book (see Meyer, *op. cit.*, p. 557), but he makes no use of this information in his explanation of the two cremations of Pāṇḍu.

3. Cf. Agrawala, V. S., *Bharata-Savitri*, Vol. 1, Preface, p. 6. Agrawala has frequently and, in our opinion, successfully used these tests to suggest lateness of passages.

to the two cremations of Pāṇḍu are based on purely logical considerations.

Surprising though it is for authorities like Hopkins, Meyer, Sukthankar, etc., there is no doubt that they were hasty and mistaken in their judgments. They did not look hard enough for adequate explanation of the supposed anomaly and ignored not only the brahmanical dharmasāstric texts, which were expected to throw light on the problem, but also the epic tradition. In fact, one gets the impression that they were unfair to the epic narrative itself. The mistake is particularly interesting, and also enlightening, in the case of Sukthankar on whom had fallen the responsibility also of preparing the critical edition of the Ādi-parvan, which contained this episode.

If we do not dramatize or understand the epic statements much too literally, as Hopkins and Meyer, and, perhaps inspired by them, Sukthankar, seem to have done, then all that is left of the contradiction is that the dead Pāṇḍu, and with him also his younger wife Mādri, was cremated twice. All these scholars were right in pointing to this apparent anomaly, but they underplayed the structural and narrative unity of the whole episode. It must be emphasized that the epic narrative itself is fully conscious of cremation twice over, inasmuch as the chapter 117 opens with the statement that the sages, having performed the last rites of Pāṇḍu, assembled and took counsel,¹ and contains the long

1. *Mbh.*, 1. 117. 1 (reproduced above, p. 61, fn. 3).

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report of the sages to the dead king's relatives in Hāstinapura which informs the Pāṇḍu had died earlier and was cremated with Mādri.¹ With reference to the so-called 'body' or 'bodies' which they are said to have brought with them, along with Kuntī and the sons, the sages' parting advice was to perform whatever rites remained to be performed about her and him, to do the *preta-kārya*, *pitṛmedha*, etc..² The epic commentarial tradition also recognised the unity of the narrative and there seems no indication that it was ever found anomalous. The *Jñānadīpikā* commentary of Devabodha, which is one of the earliest commentaries on the epic and whose excellence is appreciated by Sukthankar himself,³ does not comment specifically on the fact of Pāṇḍu's cremation twice, nor does it find necessary to explain the 'body' or 'bodies' said to have been brought by the sages with them to Hāstinapura. But, in commenting on the chapter 117 in general and on its opening verse and

1. Ibid., 1.117.27-28 (reproduced above, p. 62, foot-notes 3 & 4).
2. Ibid., 1. 117. 29-31 (see above, p. 62, fn. 4).
3. See Sukthankar, "Prolegomena" to the Cr. edn. of the Ādi-parvan, p. lxx. The comments of Sukthankar in appreciation of the *Jñānadīpikā* commentary of Devabodha are worth reproducing: "..... He is, therefore, most likely, the *earliest commentator* of the Mahābhārata hitherto known, and, in my opinion, also the *best*. The commentary is in any case most valuable, and its evidence, both positive and negative, of supreme importance for the constitution of the text." For more on the Mahābhārata commentators, including Devabodha, from the pen of Sukthankar, see Sukthankar, *Critical Studies in the Mahābhārata*, pp. 263ff.

the concluding advice of the sages in particular, it obviously fully takes notice of the two cremations of the king and his wife.¹ The same may be said also of the much late and inferior commentary of Nilakanṭha.² In fact, the very strength of the manuscript tradition should be treated as an argument in favour of the unity of the description. Just as it compelled Sukthankar to retain the anomaly in his critical edition, it should have compelled him also to look for a more satisfactory explanation.

Now, a second cremation of the same person by itself is neither wholly illogical nor unknown to the Indian tradition. In fact, *punardāha* or re-cremation of some sort, or re-disposal of the remains of the same person, is specifically provided for in certain situations in the brahmanical tradition. The prescriptions which fit our context are the ones made in

1. See *Jñānadīpikā : Commentary by Devabodha on the Ādiparvan of the Mahābhārata* (ed. R. N. Dandekar), pp. 63-4, for comments on Chs. 116-118 of the parvan. Devabodha comments on l. 117. 1, and explains *avabhṛtham* (in *pāṇḍor avabhṛtham kṛtvā*) as *jīvanayajñāntam*. Similarly, he comments on the verse 31 of this chapter, and explains *pitṛmedham* as *uśotsargādi*. His comments on l. 118. 17 and 18 may also be seen.
2. See Nilakanṭha's commentary on the chapters 125, 126 and 127 of the Ādi-parvan (which correspond to *Mbh.*, Cr. edn., I, Chs. 116, 117 and 118 respectively). Nilakanṭha also apparently accepts the narrative unity of the epic description and does not find any incongruity in the reference to double cremation. On Nilakanṭha as commentator in general, see Sukthankar, "Prolegomena" to his edn. of the Ādi-parvan, p. lxx ff.; also by the same author, *Critical Studies in the Mahābhārata*, pp. 263 ff.

relation to persons who had died in a distant, foreign land.¹ It is prescribed in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* that if a "performer of a long sacrificial session—*te* wit, he who (regularly) offers the Agnihotra—were to die whilst staying abroad" (*dīrghasattri agnihotrām juhvat pravasan mryate....*), his bones were to be brought home; they were to be thrown on a black antelope skin, arranged in accordance with man's form, then covered with wool and sprinkled with ghee, and burnt with his sacrificial fires.² Similar rules are laid down in the *Kātyāyana Śrauta-sūtra*, *Baudhāyana Pitrmedha-sūtra*, *Gobhila Smṛti* and *Vasiṣṭha Dharma-sūtra*.³ There are provisions again for eventualities when even the bones could not be found. These are available in the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* and, following it, in several *Sūtras* and other works. We are told that an effigy of human frame with *palāśa* stalks or leaves of specified number were to be made on a black antelope skin; this was to be bound round with woollen thread, covered with *yava* flour mixed with water, anointed with clarified butter, and then finally cremated with the fires and sacri-

1. See Kane, *History of Dharmasāstra*, Vol. IV, pp. 223ff.; also Pandey, *Hindu Saṃskāra*, pp. 343-4. The evidence from Dharmasāstric texts cited by us here is taken mostly from Kane, but original texts have also been consulted in some cases.
2. *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (ed. Albrecht Weber), XII. 5. 1. 13-14; see also Eggeling's tr., in *SBE.*, Vol. XLIV, pp. 200-1; Kane, op. cit., Vol. IV, p. 223.
3. *Kātyāyana Śrauta-sūtra*, 25. 8-9; *Baudhāyana Pitrmedha-sūtra*, III. 3; *Gobhila Smṛti*, III. 47; *Vasiṣṭha Dharma-sūtra*, IV. 37; all these are cited in Kane, op. cit., Vol. IV, p. 223.

ficial implements of the dead person.¹ The *Suddhiprakāśa* observes that similar procedure has to be followed even in the case of persons who had not consecrated *śrauta* fires.² In fact, the wealth of material collected by the late MM. Kane³ leaves clear impression that the eventuality of death in a foreign land away from home was deemed an important one and adequate ritual provision was made for it.

◁ The re-cremation of Pāṇḍu and his wife Mādri should be read in the background of the above prescriptions. It is true that the *Mahābhārata* example

1. *Āitareya Brāhmaṇa*, 32. 1, and others, as cited in Kane, op. cit., pp. 224-5. The number of *palāśa* stalks or leaves as 360 was apparently fixed on the basis of the number of bones supposed to be in the human body, at least in so far as the tradition contained in certain Vedic texts and in the *Caraka Saṁhitā* is concerned (see Macdonell and Keith, *Vedic Index of Names and Subjects*, Vol. II, p. 360, s. v. *śarīra*; Kutumbiah, P., *Ancient Indian Medicine*, pp. 6-7). While it is significant that the attempt thus was to reproduce the human likeness as far as possible, the fact remains that the number of bones in the human skeletal frame as imagined here is not quite accurate. The *Suśruta Saṁhitā*, which represents the ancient Indian surgical tradition, reduces the number to 300, but that is still considerably more than the number counted today, 206 to be precise. Modern scholars offer various explanations for these inflated figures, but it seems undeniable that the ancient Indians' knowledge of human anatomy was quite deficient; see Macdonell and Keith, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 360, esp. fn. 25; Kutumbiah, op. cit., pp. 6 ff.; Sharma, P. V., *Āyurveda ka Vaijñānika Itihāsa*, pp. 68, 486 ff. Apparently, the number of bones was fixed at 360 following the number of days in the year.
2. See Kane, op. cit., p. 225. The *Suddhiprakāśa* cites *Brahma Purāṇa* as authority.
3. Kane, op. cit., pp. 223-5.

cited here would not fit literally into these provisions, and accurate parallels for the individual details in the ritual prescriptions may not be cited in the epic description. Nevertheless, the so-called contradiction stands resolved. The episode of Pāṇḍu's and Mādri's death and cremation as narrated in the Ādi-parvan is not anomalous or self-contradictory; on the contrary, it is a consistent and sensible account. It is quite thinkable that Pāṇḍu, who may be regarded as an ideal king by brahmanical standards and presumed to have established the sacrificial fires and performed sacrifices, having died and, we may add, also cremated with his wife Mādri in a foreign land, their remains were brought home and second cremation accorded them, as prescribed.¹ What the sages of the Himalayan resort could

1. That Pāṇḍu died in a foreign land fulfils one requirement of the Dharmaśāstric prescriptions under consideration—apparently the most important requirement. It is difficult to quote specific statements, however, that he was also a performer of Vedic sacrifices and had established the sacrificial fires for the purpose, and this has only to be inferred. The nearest that we come to that suggestion are when Pāṇḍu is said to have decided to leave home with his wives to lead the life of an anchorite and vowed that, among other things, he would perform his daily worship of the fire (*Mbh.*, 1. 10.31); or when, restrained by the curse that threatened his life, he bemoans his inability to produce male progeny in the words: "I have discharged my customary religious duties towards seers, gods and men, but am not yet free from the obligations to my ancestors" (*ibid.*, 1. 11.14-15). But such suggestions apart, the total portrayal of Pāṇḍu, especially the sentiments conveyed in the detailed description of his cremation—that he was loved alike by his relatives and subjects—creates the clear impression that he was an

have brought with them, and, even according to the epic description, actually did bring, were only the remains or the charred bones of the couple.¹ An accepted meaning of the word *śarīra* in ancient Indian literature, whether in Sanskrit or Prakrit languages, especially in funerary contexts, is 'skeletal remains' or 'bones',² and that is precisely the

ideal king by brahmanical standards. It may be noted that the *Mahābhārata* contains frequent advice to kings to, among other things, study the Vedas, perform *Agnihotra* and other sacrifices, etc. (see, e. g., *Mbh.*, 5.40.24; 13.128.39-40, 49; also Bhattacharya, *Mahābhārata-kalīna Samāja*, p. 377). As a representative example, we may notice the routine of Yudhiṣṭhira, of bathing every morning, reciting sacred *mantras* and offering worship to the fire (*Mbh.*, 7.58.7-13; notice also the reference to the daily worship of fire by Dhṛtarāṣṭra, in *Mbh.*, 15.3.9). The *Arthaśāstra* of Kauṭilya seems to envisage that the kings were expected to perform Vedic sacrifices regularly; see *The Kauṭilya Arthaśāstra* (ed. R. P. Kangle), Pt III : (*A Study*), p. 156.

1. As already seen, Meyer also felt that the body-burning in the later chapters could only be understood as referring to bones, but he did not find this really agreeing with the actual account, and, therefore, looked for another explanation of the incongruity.
2. See Böhlingk & Roth, *Sanskrit Wörterbuch*, s. v. *śarīra*; Monier-Williams, *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s. v.; Grassmann, *Wörterbuch zum Rg-veda*, s. v.; also Rhys Davids, etc., *Pali-English Dictionary* (PTS.), s. v. *śarīra*, 3 & 4. It is generally agreed that, already in the *Rg-veda*, the word, when used in plural, often means "bones"; see, e. g., *RV*, X. 16.3 (perhaps the same sense is to be seen also in X. 16.1). Much clearer indication is in *Vājasaneyi Saṃhitā*, 35.2 and 5, which is made still more explicit by the commentators Uvāta and Mahīdhara (see *Vaj. Saṃhitā*, with the comm. of Mahīdhara, ed. A. Weber, and *ibid.*, with the commentaries of Uvāta and Mahīdhara, ed. J. L. Shastri). See also *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, XIII. 8.2.5; 8.3.3; also XI. 6.3.11 (*ibid.*, tr. Eggeling, *SBE.*,

meaning it carries in its epic usages here in the ch. 117, verses 6 and 30, and again in the ch. 118, verse 18.¹ It is these remains, therefore, which were suitably anointed, decorated, dressed and prepared in many other ways, perhaps enough to give them a human likeness, and were carried in a *śibikā* and cremated, as described for us so realistically and with such wealth of detail in the chapter 118.²

XLIV, pp. 431, 433, 117 respectively); Yājñikadeva's commentary on *Kātyāyana Śrauta-sūtra* (ed. A. Weber), 25. 8. 9 (incidentally, the context here is cremation of the bones of a person having died away from home.). For examples of the use of the word *śarīra* in the sense of "bones" or "bone-relics" in early inscriptions, see e. g., Sircar (ed.), *Select Inscriptions*, etc., Vol. I, p. 81; Piprahwa Buddhist Vase Inscription; Narain, "A New Version of the Minor Rock Edict of Aśoka", *Bharati*, No. 5, 1961-62, pp. 99, 105 (also Mirashi, *ibid.*, p. 140); several instances in Konow (ed.), *Kharoṣṭhī Inscriptions*, etc., vide the word *śarīra* and 'relics' in the index.

1. As seen above, Agrawala also suggested this briefly, citing early Buddhist literature, but he found no use for this interpretation in explaining the apparent contradiction.
2. It must, of course, be presumed that the *Mahābhārata* commentarial tradition was all along aware of this, and the commentators did not find it necessary to explain the word *śarīra*. However, a statement from Nilakanṭha may be quoted. Commenting on *Mbh.*, 1.126.4: *tasyemānātmanjan deham bhāryām ca sumahat-manah*, he explains *deham* as *dehayaṁ asthīni*. Ch. 126 of Nilakanṭha's version corresponds to Cr. edn. Ch. 117 and this verse is treated in the latter as interpolated between 1.117.3 and 4. But that does not effect our argument. Nilakanṭha's influence appears obvious on some modern scholars and translators of the epic. Thus, Sukhamaya Bhattacharya, apparently under the same influence, understands the word *śarīra*, in the descriptions of Pāṇḍu's cremation, in the sense of "bones"; see his *Mahābhārata-kālina Samāja*, pp. 338-9

Since the ritual prescriptions regarding the reconstruction of human likeness on the remains of such dead persons, or even using purely vegetal materials, are so specific, it is difficult to accuse the composer of this epic episode even of undue poetic licence, perhaps not even in the verse 118.20, which speaks about the dressed and anointed dead Pāṇḍu appearing as if he were alive and at which Sukthankar particularly pointed his accusing finger.

◁ In the description of the cremation of Pāṇḍu in the Ādi-parvan, we have yet another exceptional mode of disposal of the dead body as practised in the brahmanical tradition in ancient India, namely re-cremation of the remains of a person who had consecrated his sacrificial fires and died away from home. But we have made also some incidental gains from our study of this episode, and these may be

(Even though Bhattacharya makes no specific acknowledgements, the considerable dependence of his work on Nilakanṭha is obvious from the citations in his foot-notes.). He, however, shows no awareness of the comments of Hopkins, Meyer or Sukthankar, or of this that Pāṇḍu's remains were accorded a second cremation following some special ritual prescriptions. In fact, he represents this act as a "proper cremation befitting a king" (ibid., p. 338), which, to say the least, is misleading. Notice also the explanations of Agrawala cited earlier. The Vulgate edn. published by Gita Press, in its Hindi tr., also renders *śarīra* as *asthi*. The Eng. tr. published by P. C. Roy waves, when it translates the word sometimes as "dead bodies" and sometimes as "(unburnt portions of) their bodies". In a recent Eng. tr., based on the Poona Cr. edn., Van Buitenen, who aims at "word by word translation meticulously", throughout translates *śarīra* by the simple word "body". (see *Mahābhārata 1: The Book of the Beginning*, tr. J. A. B. Van Buitenen).

conveniently formulated with reference to Sukthankar's own methods and observations in the context of the preparation of the critical edition of the epic. Our study fully vindicates Sukthankar's stand that the manuscript evidence could be the only possibly fool-proof or, at least, the least objectionable criteria on which the critical edition of the epic could be based. On the other hand, it cautions against hasty judgements, like anomalous and contradictory, on epic passages on purely logical considerations and without a satisfactory study of the cultural background. Such judgements may be feared to cause the more damage as they may be more easily credible, because the *Mahābhārata* is known to be an epic of growth, a work of many hands and having developed over a long period. The general approach to the study of the *Mahābhārata*, especially of its cultural data, can only be what it should be with respect to any ancient Indian text, or, for that matter, any literary work. Due allowance must be made for the nature of the text itself, and once the authentic text has been restored, it must be studied in its total cultural background as far as possible. In our case, overlooking for the moment the special problem of the dating of the *Mahābhārata*, which has been briefly touched upon already in the beginning of this monograph, it may be stated that since the critical edition has obtained for us the earliest text of the epic that it is possible to reach through the manuscript evidence, its further meaning must be unfolded not in isolation but in the context of the

background in which the epic was born and grew to its size.¹

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1. Cf. Held: "...To know what an epic is, we must know what sort of culture it was that produced it and likewise what place it occupied in that culture. A knowledge of the culture is essential to an understanding of the epic and an understanding of the epic is indispensable to a knowledge of the culture..."; see Held, *The Mahabharata—An Ethnological Study*, p. 30. In this work, Held has an ambitious scheme of interpretation of the epic, with which we are in general sympathy, though not in full agreement. For some appreciative comments on Held's efforts, see Sukthankar, *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata*, pp. 11, 18.

ADDITIONAL NOTE

ON THE NAME "HĀSTINAPURA"

In Indian Literature generally, both the forms, "Hāstinapura" and "Hastināpurā", are recognized as names of the capital city of the kings of the Lunar line to which the Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas belonged. According to the *Mahābhārata*, 1.90.36, the city was so called because it was founded by a certain king "Hastin". On the evidence of the later Sanskrit literature, "Hastināpurā" would appear to be the more popular name. Like Hopkins, Winternitz, Sukthankar, etc., we also have used "Hāstinapura" in the monograph because that is the form used in the epic (see *ibid.*; also 1.90.77; 94.90; 17.1.9; etc.), besides, of course, such synonyms as Nāgapura, Nāgasāhvaya, Gajāhvaya, etc. (Sørensen's *Index to the Names in the Mahābhārata* does not list any example of "Hastināpurā"). The form "Hastinapura" is noticed in the Southern recension of the epic; see Sukthankar, *Critical Studies in the Mahābhārata*, p. 50). Since, *prima facie*, "Hāstinapura" appears also grammatically more acceptable, it is curious that the form "Hastināpurā" too developed and was apparently even more commonly used. My friend, Dr. R. A. Pathak, thinks that this popular form could also perhaps be the original one. According to him, the word "Hastināpurā" could be formed on the assumption that the founder-king's name had originally the vowel-ending "a", and some parallel formations from ancient

Sanskrit literature could be cited in support. The name "Hāstinapura", in that case, would be an attempt at improvement over the older form in the situation when the king's name came to be imagined as having a consonant ending. However, this explanation, even if correct, would leave unexplained why we do not have any use of "Hastināpura" in the *Mahābhārata*. Metrical considerations could perhaps be imagined to be responsible for the preference for the form "Hāstinapura" over "Hastināpura" in the epic verses, but they cannot account for the complete disappearance of the latter name. In the present state of our knowledge, the supposition of a later growth of the form "Hastināpura", for whatever reason, alone would appear to satisfy the *Mahābhārata* evidence. The matter clearly needs detailed examination before a more definite pronouncement could be made.

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The abbreviations used in the bibliography are : ASS. = Ānandāśrama Sanskrit Series; BI. = Bibliotheca Indica Series; ERE. = Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, ed. James Hastings, Edinburg, 1905—; HOS. = Harvard Oriental Series; PTS. = Pali Text Society edition; SBB. = Sacred Books of the Buddhists Series; and SBE. = Sacred Books of the East Series.

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